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# THE PRODIGIOUS LOVER



*The frontispiece is reproduced from a photograph taken in Paris in 1861, with a facsimile of Richard Wagner's signature. It is from Newman's "Wagner as Man and Artist," by courtesy of the publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.*







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# *The* Prodigious Lover

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*New Aspects in the Life of Richard Wagner*

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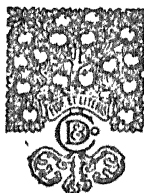
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BY

LOUIS BARTHOU

Former Premier of France

*Translated by Henry Irving Brock*



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*The Prodigious Lover*



## PREFACE

"I, adorer of women"

(*Wagner's letter to Elise Wille, June 30th, 1864*)

"A heart all on fire with supreme delight of loving"

(*Tristan and Isolde, act II, scene II*)

No great man's life as a lover has been fuller, more tempestuous and at times more tragic, than Richard Wagner's. That extraordinary musician, whose art created a whole new world, drew from love his finest inspiration. From *The Flying Dutchman* to *Parsifal*, love—love of the heart, love of the senses—breathes in his work and dominates it. Even in *Parsifal*, the single drama in which religious feeling takes on true sublimity of form, the second act lets loose accents of the most burning passion. "Adorer of women," as he confessed himself, Richard Wagner divided between them and his art an existence compact of passion and struggle. How is one to deal with a life so large and tumultuous, in a little book which must remain as simple as this?

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One cannot tell everything. For the sake of bare essentials must be sacrificed really significant anecdotes and adventures. Such omissions are not oversights. You cannot enclose in one shell, however perfect, all the sounds and all the colors of the sea. No more can a brief study analyze all the love affairs in which Wagner was involved by a passionate temperament and an infinitely expansive heart. Taken altogether, his life as a lover appears as a trilogy. Minna, Mathilde and Cosima are the leading ladies. To these three women, so very different, one must always go back. But the subject calls for a mural painting on a grand scale, and I am condemned to give a mere outline. To cut short the preliminaries, I hope the difficulties of the subject may excuse the shortcomings of the author.

## *Chapter I*

### YOUTHFUL LOVES

RICHARD WAGNER was born at Leipzig, May 23, 1813. His father who was a clerk in the police administration and had behind him some training in the law, died in the very year of his son's birth. Legal studies had not extinguished his native taste for poetry, literature, and the stage. If his son's account may be believed, he had shown "inclinations of gallantry toward actresses," and his wife often had to complain of the levity of his conduct. She was consoled—in the most honorable manner—by a close friend of her frisky husband. To this consoler, who was an actor named Geyer, a decent fellow, she was married after the elder Wagner's death.

It was this step-father who looked after Richard's education. Indeed, the boy till he was fourteen years old bore the name of Geyer. It was the only name his schoolmates knew him by

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in the various institutions to which he was sent to begin his education. The child was exceedingly sensitive and had a terrible fear of ghosts, which caused him many nights of terror. He used to wake up "bathed in cold sweat, with his heart pounding wildly." He was passionately fond of the theater, with the back-stage regions of which he made a precocious acquaintance, and of music, for which his mother had a flair.

Everything connected with women cast a spell on him, even as a small boy. He could not touch without a thrill even the trifles of dress or adornment which his sisters made for themselves at home. Full of vitality, noisy and quarrelsome, his youthful pranks were characteristic. He had "passionate friendships," first for one and then for another of his schoolmates. But these fancies soon passed. In 1826 he was sent to Dresden to board in the family of one of his comrades and met there young girls whose proximity opened his eyes to the dynamic possibilities of the feminine. He used to fake fits of sleepiness so that the girls—they were already quite big girls—would help carry him to his room. His own story is: "The thing had happened once by accident and I had discovered with surprise and emotion



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the delicious thrill which the touch of their bodies gave me.”

He was then thirteen years old. His first love affair belongs to this period, but he got no further than a speechless admiration for the young girl who was the object of it. “She was very pretty and well-bred,” he tells us. At Prague his sister Otilie, two years older, introduced him to Count Pachtá, who had two daughters Jenny and Augusta, celebrated already for their beauty. He made another trip to the Bohemian city in 1827 and made it on foot. With a face red as a beet from sunburn, a red calico cap on his head and dressed in a blue workman’s blouse, he was just reaching the suburbs when he met his sister’s beautiful friends driving in an elegant carriage. Alas, they recognized him, in spite of the fact that he looked like a tramp. He was so ashamed that he did not reappear in polite society till he had spent two whole days bleaching himself out with parsley salve and hot compresses.

His sister Louise’s engagement at the Leipzig theater brought Wagner back at Christmas of that same year to his native town, which he had not seen since he was eight. He was very fond of this sister, a lively and cheerful creature, but

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her marriage to the publisher, Frederick Brockhaus, filled her head with social ambitions and changed her behavior. Richard, resenting the transformation, fell into a mood of intense bitterness which his life at college did not tend to make less bitter. He was enrolled as a student at St. Nicholas School and the stiffness and pedantry of his teachers disgusted him. He was insubordinate and lazy but he carried on his education in his own fashion under the influence of his uncle Adolph and did a lot of reading, dreaming and scheming. He even composed an ambitious drama, called "Leubald and Adelaide." The subject was a fiery love, haunted by ghosts and interrupted by extraordinary adventures. He wanted to set it to music. Beethoven's genius had just been revealed to his young imagination. The image of the musician got mixed up in his mind with Shakespeare's—for he knew Shakespeare—and he went into fits of ecstasy which left him drowned in tears. This passionate sensibility in the youth of fifteen prefigures the man and explains him. The mere tuning of the instruments was enough to plunge Richard into a "mystic excitement." He heard Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, "young, beautiful, full of

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fire," sing in *Fidelio*. This performance by a woman "so unusual that he would never see her like upon the stage again," had a determining effect upon his life. He could no longer doubt his vocation, but what he had attempted so far seemed to him so little worthy of his dreams that his discouragement drove him to all sorts of youthful excesses.

"I entered the dissolute period in which young men sow their wild oats, and I am amazed to-day," he wrote in *My Life*, "at the ugliness and emptiness of it." He was matriculated as a student of music but he became a night-prowling rowdy, flinging empty defiance at everything, and up to his ears in debt. In order to pay these debts he took to gambling—which presently grew to be a craze with him.

Yes, he sowed his wild oats. But he had not lost the habit of work and even in this loose life, music remained for him the realm of a mental activity of surprising intensity and variety. "His stupid and wasteful existence" ended by affecting him with a profound disgust. A fever of enthusiasm seized him for the independence of Poland. It inspired him to write an overture—and he set seriously to work. Travel developed

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his musical taste. He spent six weeks in Vienna in the summer of 1832 and went—this time by stage coach—to Prague, or rather, to the castle of Pravouin, eight miles from the city, where he enjoyed till the end of autumn Count Pachtá's hospitality. The old nobleman and his two daughters made him heartily welcome.

He was now a youth of nineteen years; he had learned enough since 1827 for his puppy love to become more simply—or more terribly—love itself. Of the two sisters it was Jenny, the eldest, who set his heart on fire. "She was slim, with black hair, deep blue eyes and her features were of the noblest aristocratic mould," he says. This "perfect ideal of beauty" enthralled the young musician's burning imagination. All he lacked was "a little effrontery" to make a declaration which might have been answered with equal ardor. He struggled against his "overflowing passions" and his feverish nights wore him out with cruel emotions. One evening when he was seated near Jenny's piano, he rushed out precipitately into the park to hide his tears. The stars and the church bells cooled his ardor, but not his love. That night inspired him to write a song

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"The Bells"—a song which has unfortunately been lost.

Jenny and her sister had no trouble in guessing what Richard Wagner was afraid to put into words. They teased him unmercifully. His shyness tortured him. Then in his turn he became aggressive. Nothing is so terrible as a timid man aroused in his wrath. Resentful and jealous, Richard Wagner let himself go, used outrageous language, was carried away by fits of fury. The two girls were natural children, whose mother could boast more beauty than education. Their superficial education and the ordinary character of their artistic tastes answered well enough with the rough and conceited local country squires who divided their time between the girls and their horses. Wagner said they ought to be ashamed of having such a gang of hangers on. His heart and head were wounded. Drawn toward higher things by the genius stirring within him, it hurt him that he could not find in Jenny the responses or the impulses of which he felt himself worthy.

When the Pachtá family returned to Prague Wagner did not stay in their house, but while he went on with his musical studies he continued

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his "singular love-making tactics." For the first time he knew the pangs of jealousy as he looked upon the young women buying lavish toilettes to excite the admiration of the gentry he hated. He knew his emotions were exaggerated, but it seemed to him that he was living through the hellish rivalries of a love-intrigue out of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. The mother of the girls had taken lessons from her own experience. If her daughters did not make the aristocratic marriages which their origin made difficult, she counted on lucrative connections for them with the rustic squires who could not or would not marry them. Their behavior matched this program. Did Wagner, at the moment when he left Prague, have an inkling of what was up? I cannot say. But he wrote to his friend Theodore Apel on December 16, 1832 a heart-breaking letter in which he poured out his young despair. "Grant me all your pity. She was not worthy of my love—the chill of Death has settled upon my heart. Enough, enough—and too much, already." Yet, though the desertion of Jenny hurt him, he still felt within him "a yearning for love." The cruel experience had taught him something, without reforming him. Born for

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Westport

love, he must love always, throughout a life made up of adventures, the memory of which he has himself preserved and made sacred. We need only let him talk to know—or very nearly know—the true story of his heart.

Disenchanted with Jenny, Wagner took up again the poem of an opera *The Marriage* with a tragic action which bore the marks of his baffled passion. By the advice of his sister Rosalie, in whom he had a tender trust because of her fine character and artistic feeling, he destroyed this manuscript and began to write *The Fairies* which was also a love story. He composed the music for it in the summer of 1833, at Wartzburg, where his eldest brother Albert had found him employment as chorus master of the theater. His twenty years had not tamed his native wildness. He had a harmless little affair with a chorus singer, one Therese Ringelmann, a gravedigger's daughter, with a fine soprano voice. He gave her lessons according to a method which he confesses later on considerably astonished him. The idyll had no serious consequences.

It was different with Fredericka Galvani, whose father was a mechanic. Fredericka had

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done very well in the theater and her big black eyes and ardent nature bore witness, like her name, to her Italian origin. She was engaged to the chief oboe player, but her eyes were not the less quick for the young chorus master, who for his part was amazed and delighted to find that he was not too ugly after all to please a young girl. At a rustic wedding where the oboe player led the dance, Wagner was so madly gay that the impressionable Fredericka was set ablaze. The good Franconian wine they were drinking was his ally, and he achieved his conquest. It was a delicious young love. The end came without dramatic incident, beyond a tearful farewell when Wagner departed for Leipzig at the beginning of 1834.

He did not manage to get *The Fairies* played in Leipzig. In June he went to Bohemia with his rich friend Theodore Apel, both of them overflowing with high spirits very offensive to the respectable people they met. They traveled in a fine carriage and the expedition gave the youths a liberty which they did not hesitate to use. They drank, they sang, they debated noisily with each other literary and musical questions. In the course of the journey Wagner sketched the



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outline of an opera the subject of which was borrowed from Shakespeare. It bore the title *Liebesverbot*,—*Love's Forbidding*, and was an "insolent glorification of free sensuality against hypocritical puritanism." At Prague—where he wanted to show that he had escaped from their net—he put on airs of jaunty impudence when he presented his friend to Count Pacht's daughters. Their father's death had reduced the fortune and the hopes of these young ladies. It seemed to Wagner that they must already have had a pretty bad time of it.

Jenny had "gone off a bit," but Augusta had become much prettier. Their detestable mother excited his contempt and made him want to beat her. What fate would they choose? he asked himself. Should they marry and get out of the mess for good, or go in for a life of pleasure? The Austrian aristocrats offered them pleasure first and marriage later. Richard's rudeness and insolence did not prevent them from treating him with affectionate freedom. He confesses also to "modest distractions on the road," which served to slake his "insatiable thirst for romance" before he returned to his family at Leipzig. That return marked the end of the gay

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and irresponsible period of his life. At twenty-one years, his youth was dead. He had spent it in dissipation, in follies and adventures the rapid succession and the variety of which gives an index of the range of his ardent, passionate and sensitive nature. Without a care, he had led an existence guided only by his fancy. Now the hour of serious work had come, of anxiety and struggle. As he wrote later:

*"It is finished, the lovely song—  
The song of my mad youth."*

But if the student had sowed his wild oats, the man had a heart and emotions which would never again let him rest. Escapades and intrigues are only the make-believe of love: Wagner had a temperament which even less than most people's allowed him to escape from love's realities. His real life as a lover begins with the summer of 1834.

## *Chapter II*

### FIRST MARRIAGE: MINNA

WHEN he returned to Leipzig, Wagner was invited to become conductor of the orchestra at the Magdeburg Theater. The company gave performances in summer at Lauchstaedt, a watering place made famous by the fact that Schiller and Goethe used to frequent it. Wagner disliked everything about this resort. He would have given up the job if his plans hadn't been abruptly changed by a meeting with "the prettiest and most agreeable girl in Lauchstaedt." The girl's name was Minna Planer and she was the leading romantic actress of the theater. She was twenty-five and in the full bloom of youth. Her appearance was pleasing, her face smiling, she had an engaging dignity which gained still more from her modest style of dress, the reserve of her manners and the repose of her bearing. This simple and quiet dignity offered such a grateful contrast to the vulgar familiarities of

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the theater that Wagner at once engaged rooms in the house where the young actress lodged.

Propinquity very soon led to friendly relations between them. When the young conductor had an attack of erysipelas, Minna came to see him and look after him. He joined her at Rudolstadt where she was playing, while he, relieved temporarily of his baton, was finishing his *Liebesverbot* and attempting a symphony. He felt a growing inclination for the girl, though she was four years his senior. His "awkward advances" had not yet taken the form of declarations, but he grew jealous of a young aristocrat who was paying urgent suit to Minna—now become very reserved toward him—and their relations were almost broken off.

They met again, coldly enough, at the beginning of 1835 at Magdeburg, where Wagner achieved his first success as conductor and composer. Minna's beauty, which had made some local stir the year before, again drew around her a court of admirers, especially among the young nobility, whose attentions, naturally, did not leave her unmoved. Though he had no rights over her, Wagner let his reviving passion and his nasty temper get the best of him: he scolded her

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roundly and they were very nearly separated once more.

Minna at this stage did not deserve to be scolded. She made her coquetry serve in her profession, but when she was very young she had passed through an ordeal, which put her on her guard against attentions carried too far. She was the daughter of a mechanic, and she had been seduced when she was seventeen, and then left in the lurch. A daughter was born whom she always passed off as her sister in order to cover up her miss-step.

Her beauty rather than her talent had brought about her engagement at the theater. She had no training for the stage, and she was a long way from being an artist by instinct. Pretty, unassuming, well-behaved, she was liked for her grace and her poise though she was not in any real sense a comedy actress. Because she was a good manager rather than a true coquette, she had collected about her a group of admirers whose attentions did not tarnish her reputation. She had known poverty and borne it with excellent common sense. What she now expected from her theatrical career was a living for herself and the means to help her family. There-

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fore admirers were not discouraged, but the favors they received never went beyond the bounds of the propriety which she had made her rule of conduct and her safeguard.

Even this, however, was too much for Wagner. He allowed his resentment to drive him again to the loose and disreputable company which he found ready to hand in the ballet-girls of the Magdeburg opera. But he soon got tired of that distraction. He decided to get a line on the real feelings of the leading romantic lady.

He has recorded the result. He found in her, not a "passionate inclination," but warm affection, sympathy, a great admiration for his ability. And he esteemed her good sense, which tempered what was rash and eccentric in his own nature. Their relations became cordial and confidential again. One night Wagner got too much to drink at a whist party. He went very drunk indeed to Minna's rooms, where she was expecting him, chaperoned by the matron of the theater. And he did not leave the house till next morning. The pair of them, it is intimated, walked out into the sunshine without having strayed in the least from the strict path of virtue. But that night, innocent as it was, changed their whole program.

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They decided to make public announcement of their love. They tagged themselves from then on as an engaged couple, who could snap their fingers at malicious gossip.

When the opera season was over in the spring of 1835, Wagner went off to Leipzig; Minna stayed on at Magdeburg, where the theatrical company was still playing. In her turn, when her season was over, she went to her mother in Dresden and on the way stopped over several days in Leipzig. Wagner introduced her to his family. His sister Rosalie refused to take the affair seriously. Richard, on the contrary, found it only the more delightful and inevitable. He felt that it was time for him to free himself from his own family life in order to pursue a difficult career on his own. In this career he believed that Minna's calm self-confidence, her common sense and her economical turn would be useful to him.

Jealous because he was in love, he was likewise in love because he was jealous. It was enough to sharpen his inclination to over-hear at Dessau some young men talking flippantly about the first appearance and the behavior of the newly arrived actress. The lovers went on a journey in a private carriage with Minna's sister in

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Saxon Switzerland. It was a trip the innocent happiness of which Wagner has set down as "the best memory of his young love."

The hour for some definite decision was approaching. It would not do for the young people to prolong a false situation which embarrassed their own intercourse and made their families uneasy. But Wagner was without means and without a job. He hesitated at a marriage so full of uncertainty. Minna got a contract to play at the Konigstadt theater in Berlin, and the pain of the separation removed all his doubts. He wrote her burning letters, begging her to come back; and decided to ask formally for her hand. On the strength of a new engagement, Minna returned to Madgeburg. With tears of joy he escorted her to the familiar lodgings which so many memories made dear.

However, money anxieties haunted him. In order to pay his debts he had made loans based on the success of his *Liebesverbot*, finished at Christmas 1836. The piece, produced on a somewhat extravagant scale, failed to bring the expected returns. His creditors, disappointed and uneasy, pelted him with actions for debt. He could not come home without finding



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a summons nailed to his door. The situation seemed desperate. Throughout this fearful ordeal, or to use his own words, "in these hours of desolation" Minna was "truly his only comfort and his salvation." Wagner's mother urged him not to marry. He told her good-by without making any promise, and did the same to his sister Rosalie, whose sudden death occurred two years later without his ever seeing her again. The engaged couple passed several doleful weeks at Magdeburg, before further action was forced on them.

Minna went to Koenigsberg where she had an advantageous engagement in view. Richard went to Berlin, and arrived in "that pretentious royal city" on May 18, 1836. He did not succeed in bettering his fortune there, and he turned up on Minna's doorstep two months later determined to "assure by a union once and for all the integrity of his conduct and his future artistic progress." His first impression of Koenigsberg was not favorable; but Minna had made good in her new surroundings. Always in those days even tempered, kind and sympathetic, she restored his courage. After a journey to Memel where she played, and where Wagner, idle, em-

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barrassed and jealous, felt even more keenly the ridiculous falseness of his position, the question of marriage came up again.

"So that each of us shall have the right to be jealous of the other," he wrote later to a friend, he resolved to marry Minna. The formalities caused some delay, but the wedding was celebrated at last, November 24, 1836, in the church at Tragheim, a suburb of Koenigsberg. The marriage certificate makes Miss Christine Wihelmine Planer twenty-three years old, thus cutting off four years of her actual age; it reports William Richard Wagner twenty-four years old. Gallantly the bridegroom had volunteered to add a year to his rightful count. Thus the ages of the pair were fairly equalized, officially, if not in fact. Incidentally, the marriage very nearly missed coming off at all. While they were waiting for the door of the vestry to open, the bride and groom cooling their heels in the passage, because the parson was late, began a regular row. They were just about to go home separately when the parson, hearing the noise of the debate, hastily fetched them into the vestry. This comic incident restored their good humor. The wedding breakfast was cheerful.

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But had Richard Wagner entered the "harbor of rest" of which he dreamed? Jealous and ill-tempered, poor and lavish, sure of his powers and baffled in his undertakings, he brought to his wife as dowry, genius, a reputation none too good,—and debts.

Minna's past caused him uneasiness. He had forgiven her first miss-step—condoned by her extreme youth. But while he was in Berlin he had suspected her relations with a rich Jewish business man. Letters which he found later revealed to him "details which stupified him." Although he had then no rights over Minna, since he was not her lover, he made a violent scene, and overwhelmed her with insults. This scene, followed by excuses, was a sample of a series of such scenes which were going to poison their married life to the end.

Yet that life, shaken by storms at longer or shorter intervals, might have been tolerable on the whole if there had not been between the pair a real and irremovable conflict of tastes. Minna was economical. She had the order, the foresight of a good housekeeper who keeps her accounts regularly and gets along with little. On the other hand Richard was extravagant, and

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addicted to luxury. He played hob with money. Without money, he was perpetually ready to mortgage a future which he was sure would some day bring him wealth and glory. Even now, at twenty-three years of age, he had in order to work to have "pleasant and comfortable" living quarters, and his establishment, furnished on credit, was the cause of the first quarrels with his wife, who exasperated him with her too reasonable reasons and her inflexible common sense.

On her side, Minna was no artist. She had picked up tolerable manners, but nothing had developed in her a taste of her own. She was all for "what is and what is accepted as the right thing." She boasted that she had contributed to the "spiritual development" of her husband, because, she said, "he had never written a line or a note of his poems or of his music, from the first rough draft, without reading it to her or playing it to her, and without discussing it with her."

No doubt these readings did take place. Wagner himself has recognized that "Minna's native calm" sustained him when, in the disorder of his thoughts, "he wandered in search of his ideal." He thought that he would find in her a "beneficent superiority." But this "collaboration"—

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if such a word may be used—did not last long. “I soon accustomed myself,” Wagner adds, “not to tell her my dreams. For that matter they were so vague that I could not get hold of them myself.” When these dreams grew clearer, Minna understood no better, and her distaste for the new art which was being created around her—due partly to her worries about money—was for the artist, irked by his routine, a perpetual source of misunderstandings, humiliations and hurts. In 1860, in his *Letter on Music* addressed to Frederic Villot, Wagner recalled that Carl Maria von Weber, “that pure, noble and deep soul” had been alarmed at the consequences of his new artistic method. Weber had conferred upon Minna the “right of the gallery gods” and let her urge upon him all the possible objections to her husband’s ideas—which determined Weber sometimes, in spite of the demands of art, to “prudent concessions.” Wagner, except perhaps in the very beginning, did not give Minna the “right of the gallery gods.” He had on the contrary to fight always against the prudent concessions with which, in spite of her recognition of his genius, she wanted to retard his evolution.

If Richard Wagner had been superstitious, he

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might have been upset by some odd happenings, in which his self and his fiancée were not directly concerned, that had preceded the marriage. But an eloquent incident occurred during the ceremony. When the Bible was held out with the two rings on it after the European fashion, Minna had to jog his elbow to make him take his. Where were his thoughts? He told later, in the autobiography which he dictated to Cosima, his second wife, how in that moment of abstraction he saw a vision of his life. "I thought that I was caught between two currents running opposite ways, one above the other. The upper one drew me toward the sunlight as in a dream, the lower one held my soul back in a state of strange fear."

His marriage with Minna, for whom, none the less, he felt "a real and warm affection" brought him more anxieties than happy dreams. Mention has been made of the complaisances of which he had been the saddened and disgusted witness in the years before the union. As his wife, Minna's attitude was equivocal to say the least. He reproached her violently, this time in the name of his just legal rights, for conduct which offended his dignity.

The situation at the Koenigsberg opera where

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he still acted as musical director grew worse and threatened to end in bankruptcy. In keeping the leaky bark of the theater afloat Wagner displayed unexpected energy; but his efforts were powerless. Nothing went well with him. He was in debt, his means of livelihood was slipping away from him, and the irascibility natural to his character increased. He ceased to be master of himself. His fits of rage made explanations impossible with the unhappy woman whom he overwhelmed with accusations to which he did not even leave her time to reply. Hysterics, excuses, reconciliations, followed, but "the crazy adventure of her unlucky marriage" made Minna the readier to receive the attentions and the sympathy which her intimates about the theater showered upon her.

May 31, 1837, taking along her daughter Nathalie, whose presence in the house had been accepted by her husband, she ran away with a person named Dietrich, a rich man, who has "given proof of his compassion in a fashion infinitely appealing." Wagner went in pursuit, but, after traveling two days which he counts among "the saddest recollections of his youth," he was forced by lack of money to give over the

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chase. When he learned that Minna, accompanied only a part of the way by Dietrich, had gone back to her mother at Dresden, his suspicions gave place to pity and he grew remorseful about his own behavior. Full of repentance, he went to fetch his wife and settled her near the town in a modest room in a hotel on the banks of the Elbe.

At that moment he had the hope of an engagement as conductor at the Riga Opera and he hoped that this post would enable him to keep house and free Minna from her perilous servitude to the theater. He was counting without Dietrich, who this time, did not stop half way. He carried Minna off. Wagner, "poisoned" by this painful business, went to Riga to take up his conductor's duties, and promptly got an engagement there for Amelia Planer, Minna's sister, whose fine voice and talent for the stage he had admired at Magdeburg. Learning that Minna had gone with Dietrich to a hotel in Hamburg, he planned divorce proceedings.

Amelia had condemned her sister's conduct in no uncertain terms, but when she came to Riga, she yielded to the pleadings of her soft heart and tried to move Wagner to pity. The poor woman



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had taken refuge once more with her family and was broken and ill. Her gay Lothario had deserted her. Wagner refused to listen to Amelia. It was Minna herself who bent his stubborn will. She wrote him a touching letter in which she confessed at once her faithlessness, her distress—and her love. Wagner, moved by a language new to him, and seized again by his old remorse, agreed to forgive her. “I answered her that nothing would ever be said about what had passed and for which I myself was originally to blame. I can boast that I kept my word faithfully.”

Domestic peace seemed to be restored. Minna and Amelia arrived in Riga, October 19, 1837. It was decided that Minna, whose health had suffered from so many trials, should give up the stage. Thanks to her care, for she was an excellent housekeeper, the flat which Wagner so particularly wanted to be comfortable was well run. The conductor, whose artistic activity had fortunately increased, enjoyed coming home after his busy days. Amelia sang with taste, and by Wagner’s admission “the three were content and happy.”

A quarrel with Amelia, who was engaged to marry a Russian captain, broke up the party.

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The winter was gloomy. But the spring and summer of 1838, spent by the pair at St. Petersburg and Mitau, brought back cheerfulness to the household and permitted Wagner to work on *Rienzi*, which was to be his first success and the starting point of his marvelous career. As the opera gradually developed, it took on proportions of which he had not dreamed in the beginning. The young composer now cherished the secret design of having it played in Paris. But how was he to convert Minna to the idea?

The behavior of Holtei, director of the Riga theater, was the determining factor. Holtei had made "shameless advances" to the poor woman. Repulsed, he cynically proposed to her a younger and a richer lover. "He had," says Wagner, "tastes of another sort: but I learned that it was his way: by making love to pretty women he thought he would pull the wool over the eyes of the public, and cloak his vile perversions." This time Holtei failed to escape the threat of scandal. He quit Riga, but to get even with Minna and Wagner, he gave Wagner, before he departed, a successor. This affair and a letter written by Scribe to Edward Avenarius, who had married one of Wagner's sisters, triumphed over Minna's

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hesitations. Hers was a nature little disposed to soar. She looked forward to life in Paris as an adventure full of peril. But she went.

After a long eventful journey, they reached the city on the Seine, September 19, 1839. Their stay there was to last nearly three years—precisely till April 1842. Minna endured the poverty, the gloom and the mortifications that attended it with praiseworthy selflessness and devotion. Never did her common sense better serve her husband, whose “noble and natural strivings as a creator of art” she had learned to understand. She did not entirely share his hopes, which she found “too often inflated.” But she blamed those who turned away from him with expressive shoulder-shruggings.

“There is to be saved in Richard,” she wrote to Theodore Apel, “an admirable talent which is in danger of perishing. Already my husband has begun to lose courage; and discouragement for him means the annihilation of the high destiny of which he is capable.” May not much be forgiven to the woman who set down these stout words and who inspired Wagner to write two quatrains thrilling with the most touching gratitude and radiant with inner happiness?

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*"It is finished, the lovely song,  
The song of my mad youth.  
The one I loved is now my wife,  
A wife full of kindness and virtue.*

*A virtuous wife and good  
Is verily a priceless treasure;  
She is more to me than a mate,  
She is my all in this world."*

Wagner, in fact, had his genius as well as his wife. In the years which followed their return to Germany he became more and more conscious of his creative powers, of his strength, of the new world of ideas, of feelings and of sounds which he carried within himself. His artistic life during the next and fruitful period which he passed at Dresden dwarfs his domestic life. *Rienzi* (October 20, 1842), *The Flying Dutchman* (January 2, 1843), and *Tannhäuser* (October 19, 1845), are the glorious milestones on that upward march. His wife is his good "helpmate" who watches over his hearthstone. There are still between them "scenes of passionate violence" provoked by their increasingly divided ideas about matters of music and art. But with her and through her he finds a pleasant domestic in-

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terior, a cheerful home which rests him for the battle which he must keep on fighting in order to get his work accepted, performed and understood.

In 1847, he wrote Minna from Berlin, where he was directing his *Rienzi*, that "nothing could take the place of their little home and their life together." "You couldn't believe how ardently I dream of holding you close in my arms, to deliver myself from the icy chill that creeps through all my being when I find myself among strangers. No, really, my ambition does not go very far. 'A fair native land in a heart I love'—that is what seems to me worth all the rest."

He abjures his youthful passions, which have left with him only the memory of sufferings, and he finds joy only in his "old love." He concludes: "May fate spare us all partings after this. Isn't that true, my dear and good one?"

The "dear good" Minna is not unmoved by this eloquence, but her "loved heart" is troubled, or rather, as she writes, her "plain common sense" is uneasy when Wagner, at the risk of losing his place as conductor at the Dresden opera, flings himself into political agitations. Politics had always attracted him. The Revolu-

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tion of 1848 relighted and stirred up in him the fire which the revolution of 1830 had first kindled. He held the social system responsible for the precarious and humiliating conditions to which art was subjected. The liberty of the citizen ought to assure the independence of the artist. Wagner was an insurgent. In May 1849 he passed from words to deeds, by taking actual part in the revolutionary movement in Dresden which the Prussian troops so summarily suppressed. His part was a minor one. But he had to flee to Weimar, where Liszt gave him hospitality. Then, to avoid the consequences of an order of arrest which would have ended in formal banishment, he left Germany and went to Switzerland. His exile lasted thirteen years.

Minna's forebodings had been justified, when she feared that Wagner's political leanings would result in taking him away from her. His flight crushed her. She lost her new cherished social position and her means of livelihood. Exasperated, betrayed, deserted, wounded in her interests and bruised in her self-esteem, she refused at first to see her husband again when he begged her to grant him a last interview at Weimar, before his departure into exile. This

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"farewell meeting" was the occasion of reproaches and recriminations poured upon Wagner's devoted head. She was carried away by the unfavorable opinion current in Dresden, where public sentiment ran high against him. She had no mercy for his unhappy lot as one of the proscribed. She saw him again at Jena, however. There they said good-by to each other with "warm and hearty affection." Wagner has left record that this lent comfort and hope to him.

Nevertheless from that day, the union carried within itself the seeds of an irreparable break. If poverty, which Minna had borne with such gallantry, had for five years, "linked their lives with a bond of iron," the sojourn at Dresden had made of "Madam the Conductress" another woman. Proud of her title, she could see only the advantages of a situation which left Wagner to face all the bitterness and all the mortifications. Clinging to the old formulas of an out-of-date music, which was, for all that, the music which paid, she found fault with the creative strivings of a genius which she could not follow. She could not resign herself to sacrifice her peace to risky experiments. She was unable to let the immediate present go, look the future in the face,

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and accept it. And she could only feel now that the Dresden adventure showed that she was distressingly right.

Indeed, Wagner had left his wife with no resources. He had advised her in their last interview to sell their furniture, to leave "that damned town of Dresden" and to take refuge with his parents in Leipzig. As for himself, when he arrived at Zurich, after a long and tiresome journey, he felt his artistic instincts developing in him extraordinarily. Recent events had cured him of politics for good. They justified Minna's fears. Wagner, parted from her and exiled to a foreign country, realized his mistakes. He remembered the letter in which two years before he had written: "A fair native land in a heart one loves is worth all the rest." Now that his native land was lost, could he bring back that heart and that love? He counted on the friendship of Liszt, "his master and liege lord," a friend beyond compare, to find him in the country about Weimar a modest asylum where Minna would create for herself and for him a new home in which, with her by his side, he might produce his works—"his most important and serious works."

In the interval he proceeded to Paris, which



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seemed to him the fittest place for the carrying out of his artistic ideas. During the month of June, 1849, which was a month of cholera and riots, he divided his time between Paris and Rueil. He met refusals and disappointment everywhere. All alone in this crowd, he reached the pass where he "bleated like a calf who yearns for the barn." In spite of his courage, he yielded often to "the most cowardly weakness," and he had to fight "temptations to crime as he saw the beginning of long days without bread." The thought of his wife—"my poor wife"—haunted him. He had no news of her. Her obstinate silence clouded all his horizon. More than ever he needed a fireside so that he might work in utter peace of soul. He wrote: "I need peace and a home of my own; if I had my wife with me, I should find both."

Tired of his vagabond life, he asked Minna to come and join him in the "nice town" of Zurich. Her answer was an acid letter in which she spared him none of the "disgusting gossip" which had been current about him in Dresden since his flight. Had he not been accused—along with another firebug—of putting a torch to the old opera house? Living in "the midst of that slough

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of middle-class perfection and magnanimity," as Wagner puts it, "his wife had become the unconscious ally of the hatreds which crushed him." She did not want to resume their life together—at least not till she was sure of a regular income to support the household. Thereupon Wagner begged Liszt to give her back to him "happy and trusting," by sending to him and to her also as much money as he could. At last Minna was shaken. She decided to take the risk of starting their married life over again.

The news made Wagner both happy and sad. He was happy to see her "from whom he had never really been estranged" and sad because he could not, in his financial straits, create for her the living conditions which would have pleased her heart—"bigger than her reason." Anxiety for the future weighed upon him.

"Oh dear friend," he wrote to Liszt "think of my interest, of my soul, of my art: save me for my art. Don't you see, my country means little to me. I am bound only to that poor woman, who is so good and so true, and to whom, till now, I have given hardly anything but pain. She is sensible, serious, without a shadow of exaltation in her being. Yet she cannot let go the bad egg

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that is myself. Give her to me, and you will give me all that I can ever wish for myself. I feel that I could beg, that I could steal, to get for my wife a few cloudless days. Come to my aid, dear Liszt." With equal delicacy and generosity Liszt in response sent Minna a hundred thalers "given by an admirer of *Tannhäuser* who desired to remain anonymous."

She came at the beginning of September—Minna with her daughter Nathalie, who was still passing as her sister, with her little dog Peps and her parrot Papo. Wagner had gone to meet her at Rorschach, on Lake Constance. She had aged enormously. Her first words informed her husband that she expected him to behave like a tin soldier. He had come with his heart big with emotion; her lecture and the domestic animals in her train shocked him deeply. But pity at finding her looking so old prevailed over his bitterness. He established her in the modest apartment which he had rented, with a few souvenirs saved from the household treasures of their first home. Happy to have got her back, he once more cherished the belief that he could now begin the execution of his "big plans for the future of his art."

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But the trouble was that he was not understood. Between Minna and Richard lay a fundamental error. She believed that her husband, with a regular order in his pocket, was going to write for Paris an opera, following all the good old rules. While he, feeling his strength "inflexible and indivisible" desired to be really "what he was and what he ought to be." She regretted the past, he thought only of the future. She was ashamed of not being any longer "Madam the Conductress" and contemptuously compared the little city of Zurich with the capital of Saxony. Her loss of position hurt her and she complained of it bitterly.

It will not do to blame her over much. What a woman she would have had to be to feel, understand and serve the sovereign genius whose mate an accident of youth had made her! Wagner found in his life women of that temper. But Minna was not of their privileged race. Nothing had fitted her for the rôle of self-abnegation, all-embracing and beneficent, which others would have accepted as a favor of divine grace. She only saw the slavery that rôle imposed. When Wagner came to Zurich, to his friend Muller's house, to ask for an attic, he had exactly twenty

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francs in his pocket. Minna blushed at such poverty. Whereas it forced from Frau Muller this enthusiastic exclamation: "But it just shows his greatness, that he is not afraid of poverty." Frau Muller was not Wagner's wife. She did not have to share his poverty. To be sure Minna was forty years old and life had tried her severely. She was afraid of poverty. Wagner, "child of Germany," shrank as a German artist from the French language. He hesitated to write for the Paris stage an opera which would risk being misunderstood there. His wife stuck obstinately to the contrary hope. In it she saw their salvation. As Liszt backed her up, Wagner resigned himself to a compromise. He wished to remain entirely faithful to the ideals imposed on him by his genius, but he agreed that in writing his opera he would both "in the design and the execution keep Paris always in view."

Liszt asked no more than that. But Minna wanted more. Liszt was too much the artist himself to sacrifice the ideals of his friend to his material interests. He told him "to convert the French to his German point of view," or rather to engage their enthusiasm and make an impression on them in favor of a more generous, more

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spacious and nobler work of art. Thus urged by his wife and advised by Liszt and by other friends, Wagner reluctantly consented to go to Paris, where Liszt had himself made preliminary arrangements. He makes it abundantly clear, however, that he yielded out of weariness and went without hope.

### *Chapter III*

#### A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY—JESSIE

THE outcome proved that Wagner was right. His stay in Paris was one of the most miserable episodes in his career. He arrived in the first days of February 1850. To his wife's taste for the fashionable "high-falutin" musical style he had vainly opposed his sense of artistic dignity and his distaste for writing as opera what he called "bankers' music." Such music was the fashion. A performance of *The Prophet* threw him into a fine frenzy. He had got (he said) so far beyond those "ridiculous roulades" that he felt sick in the "poisonous air" they created. To such depths of despair did he descend that he thought of suicide. He soon put away that grim notion, however, in favor of rosy dreams of a visit to the East.

A woman saved him. Women always played a big part in Wagner's artistic life, which often became involved with his life as a lover. About

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the time of the revolution of 1848, Wagner received a visit in Dresden from a certain Mme. Jessie Laussot, a young American woman, married in Bordeaux. She came with Carl Ritter who was then hardly eighteen years old. Both of them were admirers of *Tannhäuser*, having heard the first performance of that opera. "My art" wrote Wagner to Theodore Uhlig in December 1849, "has never lacked appreciative response in the hearts of women. No doubt that is because, amid all the prevailing vulgarity, it is always difficult for women to let their souls grow so entirely hard as is the case with the politicians of the stronger sex. Women are truly the music of life; they are frankly and absolutely receptive. From that receptivity they derive the power to make their sympathy beautiful."

Mme. Laussot's admiration and sympathy in that first interview with Wagner had been expressed with a charming shyness—and he recalled the event with emotion. He was then still unused to attentions of that poignant quality. Therefore when, in the midst of his worries and hardships in Paris, where nothing was going well, he received an invitation to go to Bordeaux to be the guest of Mme. Laussot and her family,



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curiosity tempted him. "Some devil also urged him on" he admits—and he accepted. The young woman, twenty-two years old at the time, lived with her husband, a wine merchant. Her mother, Mrs. Taylor, widow of an English solicitor, kept house. Jessie had been brought up by her scholarly father, in a taste for literature and music. He had taught her German and she knew German poetry, extremely well. So equipped and naturally intelligent, she had no difficulty in understanding Wagner's latest literary works—especially when he read them aloud to her himself. Besides, she had a real musical sense and remarkable dexterity as a performer, so that he could teach her how to play Beethoven's sonatas.

While she was in Dresden she had formed a friendship with Frau Ritter, Carl's mother. The elder woman also admired the genius of the author of *Tannhäuser*, at a time when that genius was still disputed. Frau Ritter and Mrs. Taylor, who was wealthy, now offered to Wagner, whose financial embarrassments were known to them, an annual subsidy of three thousand francs till he found the means of living by his art. Jessie had been the go-between, if not the instigator, of

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the negotiations to which this business had given rise between Dresden and Bordeaux.

Mrs. Taylor was deaf and her son-in-law absorbed in his business affairs. They were cut off from Wagner by an "insurmountable wall." Jessie alone understood him. The pair discussed all sorts of subjects with an eagerness which "carried them away" and the young woman followed with extraordinary ease the most difficult expositions of the Master whose tastes and ideas she shared. She did not get on nearly so well with her husband. Laussot was far from being as "nice" as Wagner had believed (or said) he was at first. The commonplace exterior of the household covered up an inner incompatibility.

Did Wagner become aware of it with as much alarm as he expresses in his writing? And for whom was he alarmed? He had become very intimate with Jessie. His letters to Minna do not reveal the full extent of that intimacy. "You cannot imagine," he wrote to her, "any one behaving with more goodness, nobility and delicacy than our friend Mme. Laussot. I said to myself, my dear wife, that surely you would have been much moved—penetrated by a feeling at once proud and sweet—when you saw what a pro-

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found impression your husband's works could produce on noble and unprejudiced hearts, and when you beheld the proof that your husband had it in him to call forth such generous sacrifices."

These sacrifices did not affect that way Minna's heart—a heart less noble than prejudiced. For Minna hated the "begged alms"—it was her own expression—which Wagner made it a habit, or rather a principle, to accept. Disagreement on this point was added to all the others, too numerous already, which divided the household. Wagner had a conception of his art and the conditions of exercising it, which he had set forth with proud frankness in a letter written to Liszt, October 14, 1849.

"Poor as Job, without means to win my daily bread, having no resources present or future, but an artist and only an artist"—so he defined himself—he was not willing to resort to modern methods of publicity in order to get ahead. His public, he pointed out, could be only a little group. "I must appeal to that small number of the faithful and I must ask them if they love me enough, me and my activity as artist in the best, to put me as far as their means ex-

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tend, in the position of being myself, and of being able to use my activity freely. These faithful ones are rare, and they are widely scattered. On the other hand, it is the nature of their sympathy for me to be active. I cannot appeal to grocers and aristocrats, it is not to the princes of this world, but to the men born princely that I address myself. For my true good, for the salvation of my soul, I am forced to seek, not a legitimate profit, but favors. If in this commercial age we do not find the bestowers of such favors in our own little circle, what are we to do to keep on living in the name and for the honor of Art?"

It was for his art, as a priest for his faith, that Wagner asked, and even begged, the alms which caused Minna grief and almost shame. To put in a fair light the amiable intentions of Frau Ritter and Mme. Laussot, he told his wife that they would thus have the money to lead a quiet and comfortable life. They would live thus, "not on the money wrested by humiliating traffic from a stupid mob, but on money which noble hearts give me to repay the joy which they get from my works, the purest that I can create out of my true

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inmost nature. What more could you desire, my dear Minna?"

His "dear Minna" desired something quite different. Although Wagner had declared that "his art, it alone, had brought all this" she with her woman's instinct suspected that her husband and Mme. Laussot were not drawn to each other merely by the love of music, and that they had sung together, at least up to a certain point, the music of love. She was not mistaken. Unhappy in her home, wounded in her dignity and cheated of her ideal, Mme. Laussot had not found in her ill-matched marriage the satisfaction which her superior artistic tastes might have expected. She suffered all the more from the miss-mated affair because she had not the consolation of the joys of motherhood. At Dresden Wagner had produced upon her an impression which had inspired the otherwise unpremeditated invitation to Bordeaux. The daily contact, the long hours passed together, the readings and the music, the attraction of an all-powerful genius, sure of itself, of its future and of its glory, overflowing with strength and enthusiasm, had speedily completed the conquest. Love, a passionate love, entered irresistibly into a heart which art had al-

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ready subdued. Wagner in his autobiography tells about this episode with a discretion which leaves something to the imagination. But he wrote without reserve in his letters to Frau Julie Ritter:

“If you could have seen the joy of love which thrilled every nerve of that wonderful woman, when, of her own free will, moved by a vision of love that was spontaneous, clear and naked, she let me know that she was mine! Ah, if you could have seen the expression of that joy, the happy transports which thrilled through every fibre of her being, from the trembling of her fingers to the most delicate movements of her mind, when that young woman turned her radiance upon me—upon me, a man sorely tried by life’s sorrows and lacking all the gifts which have the power to work miracles like that which flowered before me and which I tasted to the last celestial ecstasy! Imagine the beauty and the fullness of a love capable of inspiring in a woman so charming and so gifted a resolution so determined and so full of happy rashness!”

After that glowing avowal, no argument is needed. It is the proof, impulsively confided to a trusted friend, of the passion which Wagner

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had awakened in Jessie, freed by her love from the "cold prejudices" created by "the middle-class code of honor." But what of Eugene Laussot? And what of Minna? It appears that Mme. Laussot had decided to abandon to the wine trade a husband whom she did not love. As to Minna, if you would understand the utter woefulness of the tragedy, you must read more of Wagner's letter.

"Who understood better than Jessie that I loved my poor wife, that I was attached to her by the thousand ties of past sufferings endured together, and that I could not tear myself away from the luckless being without having my heart bled to the core, and in order to save her from a fate full of pain and sorrow? Who knew better than Jessie my unhappiness and my grief, out of which came her own marvelous resolution to break with all the world, to come to me, to take the place of everything with me, to heal all the wounds of my life—to heal even my last wounds?"

Jessie did not wish to make Minna suffer, she did not want "to wound her to the quick." But being "all love and only love," it was without one single concession to "horrible, base, middle-class

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hypocrisy," that she placed her fate in the hands of Wagner, whose exalted sentiments matched her own. "We were vowed to the God of Love, and we despised so utterly all the idols of this pitiful world that they did not even exist for us."

Poor Minna! She had long ceased to be an idol; she had become only one of the wretched creatures who inhabit "this pitiful world." Deserted by a husband who found in art and in love consolation for the pains of banishment, but whose future remained uncertain, she received from Bordeaux letters which shocked her deeply. If Mme. Laussot had succeeded in convincing her that Wagner was betraying neither his personal dignity nor his professional independence, by accepting the money promised him by her mother and Frau Ritter, she still lived in the hope that when he got back to Paris, he would write that opera in the fashionable manner, and that its success would at last make their fortune. She was undeceived by a letter from Wagner, himself, announcing his resolve to return to Zurich and not to sacrifice his artistic ideas to the prejudices of the Paris stage.

At a blow, her dreams were shattered. Perhaps, too, she knew only too clearly that concern



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for the "music of the future" was not the only thing that kept her husband lingering on in Bordeaux. She wrote him a letter—a "most ill-omened letter"—which, added to his other worries, drove Wagner to despair. It decided him "to have done with everything and everybody, with art and with life," and take himself off to the East where he could "forget and be forgotten." When he told Mme. Laussot his decision she was not a bit frightened. Instead she exhibited the liveliest joy. She told her lover "in hints and a few brief hurried words" that she would follow "a destiny like his." Did she not mean to break in one way or another her marriage bond, and give her life to a Wagner, set free someway or other, from Minna?

So Wagner thought when, desperate and irresolute, he went back to Paris. He wrote a letter to his wife, whose reproaches and recriminations had put him in a state of violent irritation. That letter reproached her, in turn, for her persistent misunderstanding, and declared to her the impossibility, too long evident, of their continuing to live together. "You always assume toward me an attitude of hostility," he wrote, "you find honor where I am almost disposed to find shame,

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and you are ashamed of what is to me the most beautiful and most fortunate thing in the world."

Frightened by the threat of a break, which she could count on this time as certain, Minna rushed to Paris. The "terrifying news" of her unexpected arrival brought a clear and urgent reality into the uncertainties among which Wagner vacillated at Montmorency. He had chosen that place as a peaceful asylum. Now, he decided to fly to the other end of Lake Lemman. But that did not cut him off from life, from people and from news.

Before taking lodgings in the modest little room of the inn at Montmorency, chaperoned by the incomplete score of *Lohengrin*, he had imparted to Mme. Laussot his fixed intention to break with his wife. His Bordeaux beloved answered that she would do the same with her husband. Wagner tried to show her the "eccentricity of her plan," the difficulties it involved and the lamentable consequences that might follow. But a wilful woman has her answer to everything. Jessie, firm in an intention which she had carefully thought out, informed him that a visit to the Ritters in Dresden would be the occasion of the step and the beginning.

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Unluckily, she was so imprudent as to confide in her mother, who refused to let her have the money for the journey, accused Wagner of being in connivance with her, and apprised her son-in-law of goings-on which in his heedless complacency he had never suspected. Eugene Laussot was so desperately annoyed, that he talked of nothing less than "putting a bullet through Wagner's head." He was all for going after the German musician and hunting him down.

Jessie let her admirer know the danger to which he was exposed. Wagner was not the man to be afraid. As a young student—we have his word for it—he had wantonly challenged famous duelists, and in the excited state into which this extraordinary adventure had thrown him, he did not shrink from a mortal encounter. He wrote Laussot a letter in which he undertook to set things "in their true light." But he did not conceal from his rival the astonishment he felt that a man should wish to hold by force a woman who had got enough of living with him. Without letting Jessie know what he was doing, Wagner informed Laussot that he was coming to Bordeaux where (he said) the explanations which they would exchange in a room at his hotel would de-

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termine the future. Before he set out Wagner had summoned Frau Ritter in a short letter which goes a long way toward revealing his state of mind.

"I am gathering the last strength of my suffering body to get speedily to Bordeaux, in order to meet, not Jessie, but Eugene. Look upon me as a dying man, or one sick—to death,—unless a new life is opening before me! My strength is spent. Only the miracle of love can restore me to life. Come! The question is—shall this be the last—or the first—day of my life?"

Frau Ritter could not come.

Wagner reached Bordeaux after a tiresome journey of three days and two nights. He drove to the hotel called "The Four Sisters," and sent word to Laussot that he was waiting. No Laussot came. Instead Wagner got a summons from the chief of police. That functionary, finding that the visitor's passport was not in due form, ordered him to quit Bordeaux, and refused to allow him more than two days delay. In the course of the interview Wagner learned that he was expelled from Bordeaux for the identical "family reasons" which had brought him thither. Laussot had repented of his warlike gesture and called

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in the authority of the law. Assisted by Mrs. Taylor, he had as an extra precaution carried Jessie off to the country where he kept her without letting her know of her lover's presence in town.

The lover himself tells in his autobiography how he wrote the young woman a long letter relating all that was going on. He placed it himself in the workbasket in her own room, not having met a soul in the house. For he had coolly opened the Laussot's front door and ascended unchallenged to the second story. Jessie never received that letter. Naturally, she was angry at what she thought was her lover's silence and took it for the sign of an abominable and humiliating desertion. Her anger was increased by the skillful and unscrupulous manoeuvres employed by Mrs. Taylor and Laussot to make Wagner appear as "a sort of professional betrayer" in the eyes of the young woman, who was already profoundly disillusioned and cruelly hurt by the lack of any news.

The "worthy British matron" and her not less worthy French son-in-law had, to gain their ends, taken advantage of a letter from Minna, in which without knowing it, and unjustly, she put her

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husband in the position of lying to Mme. Lausot. The poor girl, deceived and tricked by her family, had a violent paroxysm of despair, meditated suicide, and ended by believing that Wagner to carry out his base, amorous designs had been a wicked Don Juan and hideously abused her loving confidence.

On his side Wagner believed that Jessie had played him false. He held her responsible for the "childish turn" of the catastrophe which overtook him. He wrote to Frau Ritter that "this love, dead though it be, would fill him to the end of his life with happy memories and beneficent emotions." But he believed that the break had been brought about solely by the irresolution of Jessie, and her inability to rise to the height of her plans. It hurt him (as usual in such situations) to find the woman in the case unequal to the image he had made of her and not strong enough for the test. With swelling pride he wrote: "He who becomes a rebel for love's sake, even if his rebellion breaks him, he is my man; and for my own part thereafter in such a love I could have been happy only if I had taken the final plunge."

Since he had decided to put away all other con-

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siderations however much suffering they caused him (or others) he felt that Jessie, in order to realize their common aim, should have been a rebel out and out; that she should not have attempted an impossible compromise with those who could not fail to be against her. "Can a tyrant proclaim a republic?" declaims Wagner. "Was it not a mistake to temporize and to expect Laussot to consent to set his wife free? At a stroke, by that tactical error, the situation was changed."

"If I could trust my strength to defend Jessie's decision to defy the whole world, once it was a fact, and if I could trust my power to win over the hearts most bitterly hurt by that decision, I knew, on the other hand, that I was utterly lacking in the address needed to win by diplomacy a beloved for whom I needed to ask nobody, and of whom I should only have had to justify the actual conquest." Instead of freeing herself by a decisive act from the bonds which restrained her liberty, Jessie had rashly counted on her mother to facilitate the realization of her desires. She had "abandoned and betrayed the only power which could help her, the power of her love" and she had forced upon Wagner, falsely

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charged with having asserted that his marriage with Minna was irregular, the alternative of explaining himself in "hard and repellant technicalities" or of passing for a betrayer who had resorted to a monstrous lie to get what he wanted.

"The woman who should have saved me," he wrote, "behaved like a child. What was mine to do I did, however, and I assure you that it was with perfect indifference that I ran the risk of getting an outraged husband's bullet through my head."

Wagner explained to Frau Ritter that he had wished first to bring Minna around, by getting her used to the idea of a separation, through the intervention of a friend who would have told her all, but that the "resistless force of his love for Jessie" had decided him to proceed "ruthlessly" toward the "luckless woman whose life had been full of uninterrupted sufferings." Beside his sacrifice—of Minna—what did Jessie's amount to—she who had never loved her husband anyway?

Thus, Mrs. Taylor and her son-in-law had succeeded by their trickery in creating between Jessie and Wagner a terrible and irreparable misunderstanding. Believing that she had been basely betrayed, the young woman had caused her



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lover to be informed that she would burn his letters unread. "How could she do that?" exclaimed Wagner. "What power could so rudely dethrone the most radiant love and drive it away as one kicks an old dog out of doors?" He wound up his letter to Frau Ritter in terms of lush emotion.

"Ah, the very basest thing becomes possible to a heart which has yielded the key of its depths to cowardice. Woe! Woe to cowards and to weaklings! Weigh my great suffering against the happy success of a treatment jointly contrived by a shrewd mother and a prudent husband, to cure the heart of an unconventional passion. Ah, believe with me that love is here as a real thing, and not as a dream. It lives! it lives! In this most wretched world, the nature that loves sows its life-giving seeds with the abundance of an exhaustless force. But its mortal foe retains a terrible power; his arms are named education, honor, propriety, business, and the masque he wears is the hypocritical image of that love himself,—love on whom, when he is hardly yet born, that foe declares war, pitiless, frightful war, wearing all the while his smile of false affection.

"Well, the trick has succeeded once again:

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they may be proud of it, the clever masters of their curative art. It is a pretty corpse that they have for their spoil. With parade and pomp they proceed to the funeral. We, the living, strew sweet flowers on the grave. No, we are not willing to outrage the dead—the murdered one—for she was Love. Never will I be ashamed of that love. If it is dead, and if I am firmly persuaded that it can never be born into life, at least her kiss was the richest joy of my life. Neither honors nor fame's loud thunders of applause will ever bring me its like. Farewell to thee, the fair, the holy! Thou wer't dear to me beyond all things and I wish never to forget thee!"

Having buried his love for Jessie with such extravagant and pathetic lamentation, Wagner, characteristically, after a few weeks returned to Minna. His friend Carl Ritter had gone ahead to Zurich to find out how she was. He wished to soothe her ruffled feelings with explanations of the adventure, in which she had played a rôle of the entire effect of which she was not aware. Minna was established on the shore of the lake in a quiet little house, which she had organized "with her customary skill" hoping, Wagner says, "that one day I would give her a sign of life." That

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sign, brought by young Carl, was accepted by the poor woman. Her errant husband, touched by the strength which she had shown during a "sort of trial by fire," believed that he had at last found in her the good mate with whom he would steer his bark toward the harbor of the future. He hoped (he said) that he would have her faithfully by his side till the hour of death. Alas! Many more storms were to sweep across their course before Wagner was to arrive, without her and with another woman, in the longed-for harbor of safety and rest.

## *Chapter IV*

### STAGES OF A DRAMA OF LOVE: MATHILDE

“From contact with feminine natures which are both noble and loving we get a joy which is infinitely good for us, and such a joy I am tempted to find. It would be like a blessing on the work which I am about to undertake.”

*(Letter from Wagner to Liszt, May 22, 1851)*

#### *The Meeting*

WAGNER was very tired—but he was cured of the sickness which was Jessie and which had been wracking his nerves so cruelly. In the month of January, 1851, he settled down at Zurich with the feeling that he was beginning with a brand new wife a life just as new—a life which would realize at last the hopes which had been stirring in him for so many years. He had learned much from what he had suffered. After a season of passion and storm he felt himself surrounded by friends whose devoted attention warmed the

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cockles of his heart. He liked the town of Zurich and the country round about. In his own words, he couldn't have chosen in "all the vastness of the world" such another place to live in. His house was charming. Magnificent scenery surrounded it. At his very door was the lake where he bathed and rowed. He had asked Minna to shroud the past in a merciful silence; to set a course with him toward the future. She had forgiven him; she seemed even to have recovered her lightness of heart. But, in fact, she did not understand a bit better than before either Wagner's art or the character in him which preferred "alms or borrowed money" to the gainful activities of an orchestra conductor. For his part, he was surer of himself than ever, more than ever bent on developing his own style away from the beaten track of his enslaved fellow artists. Such an ambition was utterly beyond Minna's comprehension: it frightened her. Those who blame her are unfair. Is it surprising that she was unable to rise to conceptions of art which Liszt himself was unable to attain? Liszt, to be sure, was different. He respected all that his friend thought and all that he did; he devoted himself and his influence to the work which Wagner felt so sure

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was his own to do. The woman, poor soul, could never grasp "the inner essence" of her husband. She wept till her eyes were sore and was crushed under the weight of her material cares—cares which hid from her the loftier aims of misunderstood genius. "The real me is a stranger to her" wrote Wagner, who once more reached out an appealing hand to Liszt, always generous and ready to help.

Other causes of difference came to ruffle the calm of the Villa Rienzi. Minna had fetched home her daughter Nathalie, "heavy, awkward, and stupid." The girl, who was still under the impression that Minna was her sister, was not altogether patient under an exacting regime, the enforcement of which nothing but a mother's acknowledged authority would have excused.

However, it seemed to Wagner that he had a firmer grip on the domestic situation and that he managed things better. Frau Ritter, who had grown rich, was allowing him eight hundred thalers a year, and he devoted himself to his artistic labors with a freedom and tranquility such as he had rarely known before. The circle of his friends and admirers grew larger. He had left the lake shore to take a ground floor apart-

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ment in a fine big house in the center of the town. There, on November 24, 1851, he celebrated with a lively party the fifteenth anniversary of his marriage.

About this time, one of his old friends of the Dresden revolution, Marshal von Bieberstein, introduced Wagner to the Wesendonck family. The husband, Otto, was connected with a New York silk house and had a handsome fortune. His money enabled him to frequent the company of artists and literary people, and he liked their society. His wife Mathilde was only twenty, pretty and distinguished. She was the daughter of a man who enjoyed the title of Royal Commercial Councillor; she was gifted with taste and lively sensibilities, and had been very carefully educated at Düsseldorf. Husband and wife were both natives of the Rhineland and "bore the blond stamp of their country." Both were fond of music.

Thus it happened that they were present at a concert when Wagner conducted a Beethoven symphony. They were tremendously impressed. And well they might be. For Wagner gave himself ardently to the interpretation of the great genius he admired. "Beethoven's great composi-

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tions," he said, "are true poems—but they are poems the true poetic content of which only a composer can discover." Possessed with this idea, he gave his utmost care to the musical rendition, insisting on as many as three rehearsals of any symphony he undertook to perform. "In this way," he said, "I arrived at a perfection in the playing and a delicacy in the shading which delighted me all the more because I was able to sense the surprising effect produced upon the public."

Mme. Wesendonck and her husband had been a part of the public who had felt that surprising effect and they were especially glad to meet Wagner. Mathilde, for all her education, lacked any real experience of life. She has described herself at the time as "an utterly ignorant creature, like a white sheet of paper without a word written on it." Writing on that white sheet brought Wagner such delight as he had never felt before.

His letters to Theodore Uhlig, written in the earlier stages of his acquaintance with the Wesendoncks, reveal him to us in a stage of burning prophetic utterance about the art he was transforming. Curious to learn what she sus-



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pected without really knowing it, and exceedingly intelligent, the pupil came to the master in the nick of time. It might as well be said at once that the wealth of the husband came not less opportunely. At the beginning of 1852 Wagner got up three big concerts in which his own works figured in the program along with Beethoven's. It was an expensive series. Wesendonck bore a large part of the cost of the entertainment which the author of *Lohengrin* laid at the feet of his wife, "fairest of the fair," as he called her.

In July 1852 Wagner wrote to Wesendonck from Pallenza: "How is Donna Mathilda getting along with her studies in counter-point? When I return I hope she will have finished her fugue. Then I can teach her how to write operas, Wagner style, so that she may get some profit from it at least. You will have to sing in the piece. It would be easy to translate a part into English for you, since you sing only in English." The tone of the letter shows the familiarity which had already entered into the relations of the composer with the Wesendonck family.

By 1853, that familiarity had ripened into friendship. Wagner confided all his artistic plans to Mathilde, and she was entranced by the

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novelty and the boldness of his ideas. Then he read her his three *Operatic Poems*, with their introduction, which served as the proclamation of his musical revolution. After that she heard one after another all the prose writings into which he had poured the raging torrent of his ideas and the vast flood of his plans for the new art welling up within him. Mathilde had a fancy for Beethoven's sonatas. He played them for her so that she might miss none of their subtler or profounder depths.

When he was preparing to give one of the nine symphonies at a concert, Mathilde attended the rehearsals and he loved to open her ears to the finest shades of value in the music. She drank it all in eagerly; sometimes only the two of them were present at these lessons. Wagner was happy to light this young enthusiasm at the flame of his own, and to find in Mathilde's all-embracing ardor that community of taste and that recreative faith which he had so long and so vainly expected from Minna. It did not count for nothing that Mathilde was a girl of twenty, in the freshness of her delicate and gracious beauty, while Minna was forty and faded. On her were the marks of life,—of weariness, sorrow and trial.

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The truce between the husband and wife had not removed their fundamental incompatibility. In nothing were their tastes the same. Always fond of luxury and ready to amuse himself with trifles which served to soothe and distract his super-excited mind, Wagner took a "perfectly childish pleasure" in furnishing and decorating the house which sheltered his exile. The old things that Minna loved gave place to new furniture which ministered better to his craving for comfort and his love of splendor. He showered his wife with presents—a fine evening coat, two hats and a silken garment of the type which that generation called "peignoir." "The last would have done honor to a queen." But Minna was unhappy in a room crowded with silks, velvets and brocades. These splendors did not take the place of the old loved objects, or rather they took it very ill. Naturally, too, the new furniture brought new debts. "My dear good idiot of a husband does not understand," she wrote, "that my happiness does not depend upon luxurious surroundings. That evidently is another part of the inevitable handicap of his being a man of genius."

The "dear good idiot of a husband" was now

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all the more convinced of that genius. Orders were beginning to come in and he did not think it imprudent to discount,—or even to mortgage,—his future.

A visit to Paris resulted in his meeting the Wesendoncks by “accident.” But he likewise invited Minna to join him there for a week. After that came an irresistible urge to work. The “spring of life” spurted up in him like a geyser. “Nothing can hold me back any longer,” he wrote, “I must work or perish, that’s the sum of it.” For five years and a half he had been diverted from musical composition by his writings, his concerts, and his travels. He had piled up prodigious reserves which now cried out imperiously to be used. In January 1884, he had the skeleton of *Rheingold* done, and had outlined the most important themes which were to give life to that plushy and grandiose introduction to his *Ring of the Nibelung*. In May the instrumentation of the opera was completed.

“My relations with my friends,” he wrote in his autobiography, “had undergone little change in that time. I had pursued pleasantly those which I had formed in the last few years. How-

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ever, my economic situation was a bit embarrassing.”

Of these sentences, one is so discreet only because Cosima held the pen when Wagner dictated it years after the events to which it refers. But both sentences point to the character of his relations with the Wesendonck household and the last seems to look straight at Otto.

“That ass, Wesendonck,” as with annoying ingratitude he called him a little later in writing to Minna, had already done him considerable pecuniary favors. In June 1853 he had got from Wesendonck an advance of two thousand thalers upon the profit which he had expected from the performance of his operas in Berlin. In debt to the husband, he had become the mentor of the wife,—whom he had made little by little his closest confidant.

“To inaugurate his new loan in worthy fashion” and to inspire confidence in the lender, he had sent Mathilde the sonata which he had composed the previous year, just after completing *Lohengrin*. It was inscribed: “Do you know how this is done?” Wagner was immensely impressed at the moment with Schopenhauer’s “The World as Will and Idea,” and he explained

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the philosophy of the book to the lady. Indeed he did not neglect to tell her about anything else that he deemed remarkable in literature or science. They discussed all sorts of things. But music more than anything else filled their conversations. Mathilde was the first to gather the fruits of his inspiration.

"It was his custom," she writes, "to play to me in the evening between six and seven, the hour of dusk, the music which he had composed that morning. Wherever he appeared he brought life with him. Sometimes you saw him come into the room looking terribly tired and cast down. But it was wonderful how after a brief moment of rest, the clouds that hung heavy about his brow vanished; and how a veritable flame leaped into his eyes when he sat down at the piano."

Happy woman, Mathilde, and worthy of her good fortune!

"To him alone," she wrote, "I owe the best that I have." For his part, he owed it to her that he was for several happy and fruitful years "delivered from life's bondage." The words are his own. In their growing intimacy, actions and thoughts still so far kept the chaste form of

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friendship. It was a sentimental friendship, perhaps, but it was still ideal.

In 1855, Wagner was called to London to direct there the concerts of the Philharmonic Society. In England he did not forget Mathilde. On April 30, having learned that she was ill, he wrote her a cheering letter. Attentive always to his chosen rôle of mentor, he sent her the *Hindu Legends*. These seemed to him "pure revelations of the noblest humanity of the ancient East." He had, in fact, made a religion of them. He was just then finishing the second act of *The Valkyrie*, and he sent the prelude to Mme. Wesendonck with a dedication in three letters: G. S. M. The answer to the puzzle in German is: *Gesegnet Sei Mathilde!* In English it is: *Blessed be Mathilde!* He blessed Mathilde for the joy that she brought him, for the white magic of her eager young soul, which gave him freely of its secrets; he thanked her and he blessed her for their mystical conversations in which reigned such a perfect trust in each other.

But jealous and mischievous persons were watching them. Already slander, wearing the usual masque of shocked propriety, was busy with their pretty friendship, and cast suspicion

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upon its purity. The good ladies of Zurich gossiped and shook disapproving heads. They expressed their amazement at Minna's complaisance, which they imputed to her ignorance or to her weakness. Then they urged the unhappy woman to put an end to a state of things which injured her dignity as a married woman. Stirred up by this talk, Minna could not refrain from letting Wagner in London know what was up.

This "neighborhood gossip" did not move him extremely. He answered Minna in a very mild and prudent letter. He expressed his astonishment that Mme. Wesendonck "so recently regarded by everybody as a highly estimable lady," had become all of a sudden so objectionable a person that this same everybody could no longer bear her. Minna had written that people "pitied" Herr Wesendonck on account of the things that were said about Mathilde. Wagner answered that he hoped that his own wife at least would not set "those ladies" the example of a compassion so ill-placed. He laid no compulsion on her to receive Mathilde, if she felt a real dislike for her, but he refused to admit that this dislike could have as its reason "a suspicion which touched her honor." For that honor he vouched,



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even if everything she did was not exactly to the Zurich gossips' taste.

"You may be sure," he wrote, "that nobody merits your trust and your friendship in a higher degree than does Mme. Wesendonck. Just as I myself, in spite of the difference in our characters, have in her husband—who returns it, and quite rightly—a complete and cordial confidence."

Among "these ladies" who had awakened suspicions and jealousy in Minna, an active part had been played by a certain Frau Heim, the very pretty wife of a Zurich musical conductor. She had a really fine voice, but not so much musical talent, and she had given Wagner trouble because she couldn't hit the right note in private and partial rehearsals of the *Ring*. However he saw her again and had her rehearse for him, upon his return from London, the first act and a scene of the second act of *The Valkyrie*. While the rehearsals were going on Minna spied the young singer devouring her husband with her eyes. The danger was greater even than that of which Mme. Wesendonck might be the cause—or so it seemed. Certainly Wagner was not insensible to the offered charm or blind to the passionate

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glances of his interpreter. It would be going too far to give Frau Heim an important rôle in his busy life as a lover, but Minna's jealousy followed by a tiff is proof that this charmer cannot be left entirely out of account. In Wagner's life were so many of these episodes or passing fancies that when Minna reproached him with them he rode a high horse.

"Silly creature that you are," he said, "you haven't the least faith in your husband. Behind every step of his, behind every word, you find something to suspect—you think that you find something that is not there. What a crazy lot you are, after all, you and the women like you. Can't you understand that nothing in the world does you more honor than to have a husband who always comes back to you of his own volition and because he wants to?"

That is the gist of it, though really Wagner says it in the original a bit more solemnly—not to say pompously.

### *Passion*

THROUGH those laborious years during which his genius, freed from all restraints of tradition, was

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at last trying its wings in free flight, Wagner was penetrated by two desires. He wanted a smiling and restful country house with a little garden. And he wanted in that house "a heart, a mind, a woman's soul, one that understood the whole of him, and into which he could plunge all that there was of him." The year 1857, early in its course, brought him the realization of that double dream.

*"Happy swallow, if you would brood,  
"You build your own nest;  
"But I that I may brood in peace  
"I cannot build myself the harbor of silence,  
"The silent harbor of wood and stone—  
"Ah, who then will be my swallow?"*

So he wrote his longing. Mathilde understood the poetic appeal addressed to her. She was the "swallow" and it was to her that Wagner owned the possession of that desired "harbor of silence." For years he had urged Wesendonck to get it for him.

In his walks on the range of hills which separate the Lake of Zurich from the valley of the Sihl, he had discovered a spot with a lovely view. But he had not the money to buy the cottage

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which he wished to make his "retreat." Wesendonck had built on Green Knoll—La Colline Vert—a luxurious villa. "At the cost of an awful struggle" Wesendonck's wife at last persuaded him to buy a chalet on the edge of their property and to offer it to her friend—or shall we say, lover? The rent was to be paid in music—or mostly in music.

When he heard the good news, Wagner burst into tears. His state of mind became one of "deep peace, deep, deep, peace." At one stroke, all the burdens which had crushed him fell from his shoulders. To Liszt he wrote a letter overflowing with joy. In that letter he boasted of his new house and proclaimed "that good chap Wesendonck" one of his "greatest benefactors." Nor did he fail to promise himself "good and pleasant relations" with those dear neighbors whose "warm hearts" had made his dream come true. Except Liszt's own, so great and wholesome a force of friendship had never entered his life. To his benefactors themselves he wrote in these terms:

"Oh, dear, good people! What can I say to you? All at once, as if by a miracle, everything is changed about me! All my hesitations are

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ended. I know now where to take root, I know in what place I can create, bring forth, find rest and refresh my thirsty soul. I can now, with a light heart face the vicissitudes of my artistic career with all its strivings and all its weariness. For I know where to find peace and new strength, in the bosom of the most faithful and touching affection. Oh, my children, in return, you must be pleased with me—and that certainly you shall be. For I am yours for life. My success, my peace of mind, my productive activity will give me happiness. I will cultivate them and cherish them, so that the joy they give will be yours also. Oh, how beautiful it is! And it has settled many, many things.”

As soon as he moved in he went to work. Joyfully he finished the first act of *Siegfried*, and the Muse continuing to smile upon him, began at once upon the second act. The swallow came often to visit the nest which she had contrived for him. These visits were his inspiration. When the “dear Muse” was far away from him he suffered from her absence, but he did not trouble her with supplications.

“The Muse,” he said with an air of playfulness, “is like Love. She brings felicity only when she

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wishes to bring it. Woe to the madman, woe to the man who has not love, who would seize by force that which can only come of its own free will. By force nothing is gained. Is it not so? Is it not so? How could Love still be the Muse if he yielded to force?"

Wagner now was not a man without love. He loved and he was loved. Between villa and chalet were exchanged, good-mornings, compliments, vows, visits. Mathilde gave her lover little presents—an eye shade and a cushion—a beautiful cushion—"but too soft." "No matter how tired and heavy my head is" says Wagner, "I shall never dare to lay it upon that softness—not even when I am ill—not till the hour of my death. Then I would lay my head on it, as if it were my right. You yourself would place it there for me. Behold my testament."

Wagner's "heart was very heavy," he said, and yet, "what counts always is one only single possession. Without that I have, poor soul that I am, no refuge in this world. It is the only thing. It must go—and it is the only thing!"

What was this only thing? Love or Art? It was both of them—Art inspired by Love. Wagner had found in Gottfried of Strasburg the

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poem of "Tristan," and this had given him toward the end of 1854 the idea of a musical drama—"the simplest, but also the strongest and the fullest of life."

He wrote to Liszt: "Since in my existence I have never tasted the true happiness which love gives (poor Minna!) I wish to raise to that dream—the most beautiful of all dreams—a monument in which that love will find satisfaction, a mighty and complete satisfaction."

What Wagner's head had planned, his heart realized. Now that he knew that he possessed "the one only thing" now that he could hope for "the happiness which love brings," he was seized with "the violent desire" to get to work at once on *Tristan*, the poetical form of which had grown in his mind clearer and clearer. He wrote his version with extraordinary rapidity. When he paid Otto Wesendonck the first installment of his rent, he said to him joyfully: "Ho! the Lord Tristan—how he can pay the tribute." In another fashion he paid his tribute to Mathilde. It was September 18, 1857, that he had come in bringing the last act of the finished poem. After that occurred the "explosion scene," as he has

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said himself—and said it in such accents that the telling about it must be done in his own words.

“You came with me to the chair in front of the sofa, you kissed me and you said to me ‘Now I have nothing more to wish for.’

“That day, in that hour, I was born into a new life. Till then I had done nothing but prepare for that life, and soon that life was going to come to an end, dooming me to live on after. It was only in that marvelous instant that I really lived. You know well, in what fashion I enjoyed it. Not like one drunk and storm-tossed by passion, but solemnly and profoundly, comforted, free, as if I looked into the eternal depths of contemplation. More and more already, with pain and suffering, I had cut myself off from the world. Everything in me, even my art of creation, had nothingness for its goal.

“That glorious instant gave me back to reality, with a certainty so absolute that I had the sense of a silence—of a solemn pause. A noble hearted woman, till that day hesitating and afraid, threw herself boldly into the ocean of sorrow and suffering to give me that sublime moment, to say to me, ‘I love you.’ So you devoted yourself to death in order to give me life, so I received your



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life, to leave the world with you, to suffer with you, to die with you. Then the curse of unsatisfied desire was lifted. The anguish of mere emotion may have taken possession of us, you may have been carried away by the illusion of passion, but I—and you know it well—I have remained always the same. I may have wandered and suffered, but always, putting all bitterness aside, I knew surely that the light of that moment would never be extinguished—that your love was a supreme good, and that without you my existence would deny itself.

“I thank you, beautiful angel and full-cup of love.”

Intoxicated with the perfume of this love, of which he must not “from that terrible moment lose so much as an atom,” having drunk the philter of Love and of Death, Wagner wrote the magic and maddening music of *Tristan*. It was no longer to a dream that he raised a monument. It was to the living reality of a tragic passion. Mathilde, living in the exaltation of that passion, followed from day to day the progress of the masterpiece. Wagner played it to her. He had finished that tender passage, to which their

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avowals had suddenly given an exact meaning, which goes with the words:

*"The wound that Morold gave him  
I will heal, that he may return to life."*

And when he had written "the explosion scene" between Tristan and Isolde he exclaimed, "I am on the very pinnacle of joy."

At Christmas he sent his beloved a winter flower "full of pure sweet honey, without a drop of poison" and for the feast of Saint Sylvester these verses written in the same measure as the love duet in the first act:

*Most happy,  
Snatched from pain,  
Free and pure,  
Thine forever,  
The plaints and renunciations of Tristan and Isolde.*

*In the chaste gold of sound  
Their tears and their kisses  
I lay at your feet;  
To do honor to the angel  
Who has lifted me so high.*

Lifted so high, "in the joy and tumult of his heart" Wagner could say, like Tristan that he

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was "set free of the world," but as with Tristan the world kept jealous watch. All the Melots are not in the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*. Nor all the King Marks. Otto Wesendonck with all his "honest frankness"—it is Wagner speaking,—“showed a certain uneasiness at my being so much at home in his house. Attentions were paid to my comfort in the matter of heat and light and meal hours which seemed to him to invade the prerogative of the master of the house. Confidential explanations became necessary. Out of them an understanding more or less tacit was arrived at—and we had to bring into our relations a certain degree of reserve which often amused the two initiates.”

To learn the nature of that “more or less tacit understanding” one must consult another letter of Wagner which is much more revealing. Here he admits the increasing jealousy of Otto and goes on: “The greatness of his wife’s behavior consists in this. Always, from the very first moment she told her husband the state of her heart, and so led him little by little to the attitude of the most complete resignation. How many struggles and sacrifices were required to reach this point, it is not hard to guess. If Mathilde man-

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aged to gain her victory, she owed it solely to the depth and height of an affection utterly stripped of egotism. That affection gave her the strength to show her real self to her husband so clearly that he, when she had at last threatened to kill herself, spontaneously agreed to cease all contact with her for the future and to give evidence of his unshakable love for her only by assisting her in her tender solicitude for me."

The assistant of that solicitude hesitated when Mathilde wanted Wagner near her in the chalet as a neighbor. Otto objected. But he had to yield. He resigned himself to the utmost of Mathilde's demands, for the love of his children. He was unwilling to deprive them of their mother. To take the composer's word for it he showed an entire and cordial friendship for Wagner over whose dear head Mathilde would have a "happy and cloudless sky" as perpetual canopy.

"Such," Wagner concludes, "is the incredible success achieved by this magnificent love of the purest and noblest of women."

At the beginning of 1858, however, certain happenings—assisted, no doubt by explanations,—came very nearly compromising the success of

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an understanding which could be kept in working order only by the superhuman self-abnegation of a husband condemned to a singularly painful and humiliating rôle. Wagner "to soften a little the anguish of that kindhearted man" (it is himself again who is speaking) decided to go away for awhile. He spent some weeks in Paris. When he returned "the marvelous protecting care" of Mathilde and his own removal from the scene had obtained the result he hoped for. The understanding seemed perfect.

In March Mme. Wesendonck indulged the fancy of getting up a concert in the big and elegant hall of her villa. The party was in honor of her husband's birthday, and she asked Wagner to be the director. He took his own time about it, in order to do the event full justice, and the date of the anniversary was passed when the orchestra which his care had brought together played symphonic fragments of Beethoven, in his gayest aspects— except for the adagio of the Ninth Symphony. The last was the climax of the concert which ended in the midst of general emotion.

Wagner had received from the hands of the little daughter of the Wesendoncks a baton of carved ivory. Everything had gone well in the

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presence of the crowd of guests and the hosts were delighted with the rare honor which their distinguished friend had done their house. But Wagner had a "sense of melancholy" which was shared by Frau Wille, who was his friend as well as Mathilde's. He seemed to hear "a warning voice of destiny." Two lines in the autobiography are more explicit. "The new affection of my life had reached its highest point, it had even passed that point. The string of the bow was drawn too tight."

Wagner's autobiographical explanation runs ahead of events. Indeed it is in his letters formally repudiated. But it raises a question which cannot be avoided either here or later. What was the nature of the affection which linked the composer with Mme. Wesendonck? How far had it gone? How far had they both gone? Nobody can believe—that the record "prepared in silence" by Mathilde "for posterity" and published with that description by her family after her death, is complete. The disappearance of a number of the original letters makes it impossible to compare them with the copies given in the correspondence. How did these letters disappear and why? On the other hand there are obvious omis-

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sions in the published text. What is to be said about it? What is to be believed? Suspicion, aggravated by disappearances and suppressions which look like precautions, is further aroused by the letter which Wagner wrote to Mme. Wesendonck from Venice, January 1, 1859. Not a word of the essential passage in this letter can be omitted without danger of altering, willy-nilly, the meaning.

“No, regret them not, those caresses with which thou hast adorned my poor life. I knew them not, those perfumed flowers from the virgin soil of a noble love. The poet’s dream was to change into a marvelous reality. That dew of life-giving and transfiguring joy, was to fall for once on the ungrateful soil of my existence. I never hoped for it and now it seems to me that I knew it anyhow. Now I am ennobled. I have been dubbed knight. On your heart, in your eyes, by your lips—I have been set free from the world. Every particle of me is free and noble. The consciousness of having been loved by you with such fullness of affection and yet such intimate chastity goes through me like a sacred shudder. Ah, I breathe still the magic perfume of those flowers which you gathered for me in your heart.

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They were not growth of this earthly life. Their perfume is the perfume of celestial flowers—of a death divine and a life eternal. Such flowers used of old to decorate the bodies of heroes before they were burned to ashes on the funeral fire. She who loved threw herself into that tomb of flame and perfume to unite her ashes with those of him she loved. Then they were one. A single element, no longer two human beings, but a divine substance of Eternity.

“No, repent thee not! Those flames burn bright and pure. No darkling glow, no smoke of anguish shall mar their brightness. The caresses of thy love are the crown of my life, the roses of joy that have bloomed in my crown of thorns. Behold me proud and happy. Not a wish—not a desire. Gladness, conscience in the highest and strength for anything, strength to face all the storms of life. No, no, repent thee not, repent thee not.”

That moving and burning text, shot through by the very thrill of love, bears its witness. The words can be debated and the shades of meaning microscopically examined, but what tells most is the movement, the accent, the flame. Should we take it as a confession and believe with M.



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Edouard Schure, that for the two lovers of The Retreat as for Tristan and Isolde the flame went out in the darkness of night? Turn to the lines of *Tristan*, spoken in darkness:

“Art thou mine? At last—on my heart. Is it truly thee that I feel? Thine eyes? Thy mouth? Thine hands? Thy heart? Am I, I, art thou, thyself? Oh, soul’s delight! Oh sweet, sublime, burning, glorious, blessed, voluptuous moment—intoxication of joy—ecstasy of happiness! I and thou, united always—always, always.”

In the letter is something like an echo of the poem, the same breathlessness, the same head-long ardor, the same ecstasy, the same fire, the same “drunkenness of two hearts clasped in the sublimest delight of love.”

But perhaps honor was stronger than love. Who knows? Who may say with certainty? Who may say, and especially who can prove the contrary? And is it worth taking useless trouble about?

What is known is enough. A great passion inspired a great masterpiece.

Life was transferred to the stage, with differences. On the stage, King Mark, the betrayed husband, rends the net of a love which goes be-

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yond bounds. In life it is Minna, the betrayed wife, who watches and surprises and tries to separate the lovers. If you believe Minna she had reason to complain in September 1857 of the goings on of that "young Mme. Wesendonck," who was so supercilious and so haughty that virtuous Minna refused all of the minx's invitations until she received due apologies and was reconciled with her. The truce did not last long. By her own account Minna was not jealous.

"It happens so often," she said, "that men have affairs outside the home. Why shouldn't I let it be so with my husband."

But she had her pride. She lived on the ground-floor of The Retreat—L'Asyl—Wagner occupied the story above. When Mathilde came to see him, she forbade the servant to say that she was "upstairs." Minna was hurt by these concealments and arrangements between the servant and her rival. She would have liked to be spared "these discourtesies, these humiliations, these absurd and offensive concealments." All of it made talk. It made people laugh. Tongues were unloosed. There were whisperings and clackings. Otto had taken his line in the affair, not because he was otherwise com-

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plaisant, but because he had resigned himself for the sake of his children. He was making the best of a bad bargain. And, then, what did he know after all? His wife and Wagner exchanged letters and visits. But he did not read the first and he was not present at the second. He had forbidden himself to be curious.

Not so Minna, she was more curious than ever. Exasperated and excited by the goings on between the servants, and her neighbors she was determined to know the whole truth. On April 7th, she observed that her husband was more than usually excited. She watched his every movement with particular care. He listened for the bell, and whenever it rang, emerged from his room holding a roll of paper as if he expected someone to come and take it from him. All Minna's urgings could not induce him to let go of it. He held it behind his back in very visible embarrassment. At last, the expected messenger failing to arrive, he called his own servant and directed him to take the precious roll to Mme. Wesendonck.

Minna met the servant on the way out—but by accident she says—but everything, even in her own story shows premeditation. She made the

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servant give her the package which contained the draft of the prologue of *Tristan* and a letter for Mathilde. What did that letter say? Wagner's account and Minna's do not agree. According to Wagner he told his friend "seriously and calmly" the state of his mind since the party which had left upon him so melancholy an impression. But Minna declares that the letter which she surprised and opened was "a message of the most passionate love." She quotes phrases from it. After telling about a night filled with "amorous dreams," Wagner went on to say: "In the morning I recovered all my reason. I could from the bottom of my heart send up a prayer to my angel and that prayer is Love, Love. The deep joy of my soul is in that love, the only source of my salvation. Since the day is come with its vile weather, and the happiness of seeing you is refused me, work stands still. So my whole day is a struggle between my bad humor and my longing for you." Then Minna produces the end of the letter—take note of that: It says:

"Be good for my sake. The weather seems to be moderating. Today I will come again to

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your garden as soon as I see you there. I hope to spend a few minutes freely with you. Meanwhile take all my soul in a friendly greeting.

Thine, R. W.”

“Well, what do you say to that?” Minna proceeds triumphantly. We must assume that after intercepting the letter by means which were low enough, she copied certain passages from it. But what did she learn that was new? Her suspicions had already warned her sufficiently and certain facts were patent. If she had need of certainty, did the note give her that certainty? Wagner reproached her with having attached to his words “the literal and habitual” signification without grasping their deeper meaning. But, if the letter did not bring her conclusive proof, it did put in her hands a weapon which she could use—and she did not fail to use it.

She went to her husband’s room and made a violent scene. Wagner declares that he was very calm, that he hardly stirred while she raged and that he let her go out again without so much as answering one word. They met next at the mid-day meal. She recommenced her reproaches and her threats. She pitied “poor Herr Wesen-

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donck," for whose sake she refused to permit this deceit to continue. She was ready to go away herself—but on condition that "Richard link himself forever with that woman." Richard urged his side "with his customary and unmatched impudence." As Minna refused to be shaken, "he tried," she says, "to deafen me with violence and overwhelm me with a flood of insults and threats—all intended to convince me of the innocence of his relations with that woman. Isn't it ridiculous? But I remained firm in my opinion."

No doubt Wagner talked to Minna with severity. By his own admission, he "commanded her to keep quiet and avoid all tactless behavior toward their neighbors, whether in her expressions or her actions." But as she suffered from a weak heart, which gave her morbid fancies and kept her in a perpetual state of unrest, he felt sorry for her in spite of her ravings and he tried to calm her so that serious consequences of a silly incident might be avoided. He was afraid that she would pay the Wesendoncks the visit which she had threatened to pay and which naturally he forbade in the most positive manner.

"All my hope," he wrote the day after this

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scene in a letter to his sister Clara, "was to get by degrees into Minna's head the true character of my relations with my friend, in order to persuade her of the certain fact that the future of our own household had nothing to fear from those relations and make her see that she would be acting at once both virtuously and loyally in giving up the mad idea of revenge, and in avoiding every sort of scandal."

Minna seemed to yield to these arguments and promised her husband not to complicate the situation further. But she was sick and obstinate and she clung to her fixed idea. She did not keep that promise. Wagner found it out that very evening. As he returned from a walk he met the Wesendoncks leaving the villa in their carriage. Mathilde looked worried—instead of being her customary serene self—but the husband was smiling a singularly satisfied smile. When he went back into the house Wagner found Minna mollified and looking mightily pleased. She held out her hand to him with a special graciousness and said that there was no longer anything in the way of their friendship. Urged to explain, she answered that "she had provided like a reason-

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able woman for setting the trouble straight" and that she had put things in order.

That was enough. Wagner knew that she had broken her word. He let her understand that she might have to pay dearly for her "perjury," as he called it, but as he was still ignorant of the conditions under which she had made her visit and of its consequences, he persuaded her to betake herself with her parrot to a cure on Lake Hallwyl a few hours journey from Zurich, in order to take a treatment which had been prescribed for her. He escorted her thither and settled her in her quarters. When he left her it seemed that she had arrived at a sense of the painful seriousness of the situation which her meddling had created for the household. Wagner managed to find a few consoling words, but he was too uneasy about what must have taken place in the Wesendonck's villa to promise her absolute forgiveness. When he got back he learned the whole truth.

As to what that truth was the documents are contradictory. Minna, when she entered the enemy's camp, had the fatal letter in her pocket but it seems she did not use it. She wished, she said, "to restore things to their old status and to



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act so that the relations between the two households could at least on the surface be just as they had been before." According to Minna, Mme. Wesendonck had shown herself "grateful and affectionate" and had held her hand as she escorted her home, having understood the good intention with which the visit was made. But after this "that woman" complained to her husband, and then to Richard, of having been most outrageously insulted by Minna.

"Such," Minna adds, "are small and common natures. They only know how to lie and sow distrust around them." That phrase goes too far. It goes so far that it casts doubt on the veracity of the whole story. Without meaning to be hard on Minna and even granting her grace of pity, it is safe to say that her own nature contained more to justify the epithets "small" and "common" than Mathilde's. For Mathilde's cultivated mind and her high soul made her a really superior woman. She was one who abhorred lying. She had told her own husband of her love, which he had agreed not to oppose. If Minna's visit had restored his smile to him, while Mathilde had been terribly upset by it, it was because Otto envisaged, as the result of the incident, the break-

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ing up, or at least the loosening of the bonds which held his wife to Wagner. He was more than half right.

Against Minna's version of the affair stands that of the autobiography. It must never be forgotten, of course, that the autobiography was dictated to Cosima, and that Wagner when he talked of the love which had inspired *Tristan*, had, even to the detriment of the truth, to consider the susceptibilities of his second wife. But here is what he says:

"Grossly misconstruing the nature of my relations with that young woman, who really thought of nothing but looking after my peace and well-being, Minna went so far as to threaten to tell the lady's husband what she suspected. Mme. Wesendonck, knowing that she was innocent, was so deeply wounded that she did not know what to think of me. She could not understand how I could have left my wife under so false and sinister an impression. It took the discreet intervention of Frau Wille who was a friend to both of us, to clear me at last of any responsibility for Minna's performance."

Mathilde did not extend her pardon to Minna, whose visit had deeply offended her. She made

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it a condition of resuming her relations with Wagner, that she was never to meet his wife again. That made impossible his continued stay at The Retreat—or even his living in Zurich at all. Wagner saw this, but he counted on time to adjust things and to restore an intimacy which an untoward incident had disturbed but not destroyed.

The Wesendoncks went away on a pleasure trip to the north of Italy. While Minna continued her cure at Brestenberg, Wagner alone in The Retreat worked upon the night scene in the second act of *Tristan*. It was a way of not forgetting Mathilde. Moreover, he had just set to music a song of his absent beloved. Mathilde had a very pretty poetic gift. She had written five songs, four of which had already given Wagner a happy inspiration. The last: *In the Conservatory* has the charm of an avowal—of a confession of love. Here is a rough—a very rough translation of it:

“Tall arches of green, crowns of leaves, canopies of emerald, children of places far away—say, why are you sad?

“Silently you bow your branches—you trace still

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signs in the air and—witnesses of your sorrows—sweet perfumes rise from your chalices.

“In the languor of your desires—your branches open like arms—but illusion holds you captive—you embrace only the shadows and pale fear.

“Ah, poor plants, I know it—we are sharers of the same lot—for all the dazzling light—our country is not here.

“The sun leaves without regret the splendor of a day laid waste. He who truly suffers—wraps himself in shadow and in silence.

“All is silent, a little shiver runs through the house of glass—on the edges of the green leaves—I see heavy drops tremble.”

About that poem, languishing with unsatisfied desires, Wagner wrapped the sublime harmonies which wring the heart in the magic and mournful prelude to the third act of *Tristan*. When she received this royal gift. Mathilde wrote under the lines which the genius of her lover had made immortal these two lines of *Isolde*:

“*Chosen for me, lost for me.*

“*Heart loved for eternity.*”

At Brestenberg, Minna, who was seriously ill, with a heart behaving in a very alarming manner,

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was passing frightful nights—such nights, she said, as she would not have desired her worst enemy to endure. What enemy? She was always living under the spell of the scenes which had been provoked by her untimely and imprudent visit to the villa of the Wesendoncks. She boasted of the goodness of her dear and excellent husband while at the same time she lamented his weakness. “He could contribute enormously to soften my sufferings, if he did not let himself be led astray by certain people.” Sometimes he wrote her comforting and affectionate letters which touched her. Sometimes he treated her with contempt, “saying the worst things, low and mean things,” and turning her heart against him. In fact he went to see her almost every week to watch the progress of her cure. She came herself, at the beginning of June 1858 to spend twenty-four hours at Zurich to take stock of her household and attend to things about her house. That visit did not leave a good impression.

“How much I should have preferred not to make the journey,” she wrote to her friend Frau Herwegh. “Fancy that until two o’clock at night my dear Richard never stopped making me the target of his ill-humor.” Wagner’s testimony

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corroborates, this time, his wife's memory. But he explains with evident sincerity the circumstances of the scene which occurred between them. Minna hadn't very keen perceptions. Too often she saw things as she wanted them to be, and not as they were. After a few weeks she had forgotten the seriousness of the warning which her husband had given her on the occasion of what he called her "perjury." She believed that everything had already been set right again, and, what was worse, she took credit to herself for having set it right. The incident which had just missed setting the two families by the ears seemed to her now nothing but a little "flirtation which already is over and done with." She spoke of it so to her husband in a tone of levity and mockery which displeased him mightily.

Wagner had then to explain to Minna in plain terms, in spite of her low state of health, the consequences, very serious for both of them, which her folly was in danger of bringing upon them. It was to be feared that he could not continue to live at The Retreat, that "Asyl," which had been found with so much difficulty and which answered so marvelously the present needs of his artistic career. In case he left The Retreat he

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was determined never to take up again a life together which the character of his wife—her lack of understanding and her foolish jealousy—had broken up irremediably.

Then for the first time Minna understood. She grew “soft and gentle”; she wept, but it was with resignation, and humbly she kissed her husband’s hand. She was another creature, submissive, affectionate, respectful, whom a terrible revelation had brought back to the reality of her position and of her duty. That resignation, seemingly so sincere, touched Wagner. Perhaps too, he himself was conscious of his own mistakes, of his dictatorial manner, his irascibility, of his inordinate pride, of his suspicious and unstable character. Once more he took pity on the unhappy woman whom he had in a caprice of his impetuous youth associated with a life for which she was not in the least fitted.

He promised himself “fully and heartily to reconcile her to his destiny.” But how was he to make her understand there was nothing in his heart for her but “a noble and delicate consideration without anything that could provoke her jealousy.” A woman, a true friend might have helped him to accomplish that which his own

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limitations barred him from attempting. There was such a friend, Alwine Fromann, who had all his confidence, but she could not come. Wagner expressed his lively regret in one of the most human letters he ever wrote. What the heart of a woman might perhaps have gained for him his arguments did not compass. If he did not use all the necessary patience and mildness, Minna's illness made her nervous and hard to deal with. Yet when she left Zurich to return to Brestenberg, he still believed that she was changed. Alas, she was changed only while she was with him. Afterwards, furious at the resentment he had shown, and her own woman again, she looked back upon the visit to The Retreat with a lively sense of anger—anger in which jealousy mingled to make it more bitter.

Wagner had almost taken up again his old routine. Mathilde had returned from her Italian trip. Their relations were reëstablished. In June, Wagner recommended to his friend, for a good welcome, "the little kobold, musician of his house," the pianist Carl Tausig whose precocious talent he appreciated and whose cheerfulness amused him. He was now working on the second act of *Tristan*. "What a marvelous



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birth for our child, so rich in suffering," he wrote to Mathilde. "Shall we have to live so? Who ever could be asked to abandon his children? God help us, poor as we are! Or are we really too rich? Must we help ourselves, all by ourselves?"

This enigmatical note accompanied the draft of the score of *Tristan*. Was not this the "marvellous child, so rich in suffering?" And why must they help each other all alone? Could they not, love to love, mind to mind, heart to heart, come together, support each other, aid each other, understand each other? Already the relations with his "neighbors" had the character for which Wagner had hoped. Might not time heal the wound which Minna had made and bring everything back to where it was before?

Minna's return in July, instead of aiding the reconciliation, hastened the break. Wagner had gone to fetch her. When they came back they found in front of the house a sort of flowery triumphal arch which a crazy Saxon, a man servant in their employ, had set up to celebrate the return of the mistress after so long an absence. Minna was enormously pleased. It flattered her pride to reënter her dwelling thus—not on suffer-

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ance and by the back door, but like a conqueror by a door decorated with flowers. She tasted an unlooked-for revenge upon her neighbors. Wagner was overcome with confusion and deeply saddened.

No, Minna had not changed. Her very ordinary mind was made more ordinary by the drying up of her heart. For several days she was unwilling to let the triumphal arch be taken down. It was the sign of her victory. On the other side of the garden it was looked on as an offense. Mathilde had not forgotten the insulting and threatening visit which had come so near breaking her life. She still suffered from it in her hurt pride and her bruised heart. Wagner, his illusions gone, knew that Minna in her obstinacy and tactlessness had made reconciliation impossible and lost him, this time for good, his Retreat. When he had moved into it, to enjoy there, in a fellowship of love, a calm and fruitful life, he wrote to Liszt that he would not leave it till all the moving tale of Siegfried and Brunnhilde had been brought forth into the light of day. Alas, now he must leave before the glorious and tragic adventure of his young hero was finished.

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The Retreat sheltered now nothing but wrangling and sordid scenes, the noise of which was only a little hushed by a long visit from Hans and Cosima von Bülow. Minna, in obedience to a positive order of her husband, had called upon her rival. She resigned herself to it with reluctance. Once more she said that she went as far in being an "indulgent wife" as any woman could. Had she not for six full years closed her eyes to what was going on and forgiven it? But she still cared for her husband's honor. Before she went to the cure, she had been concerned about Otto Wesendonck's honor—which she could not suffer to be touched in the slightest. Now she wrote to a friend—a woman:

"It is simply my husband's honor which will not permit him to live any longer at Zurich, after the other husband, (without my knowing when or how) has been informed as I have been of the relations of his wife with Richard." Simply! The word is not an accident. In spite of this situation Minna agreed of her own accord—these expressions which contradict each other are likewise hers—to the painful undertaking which Richard required of her. She crossed the garden to call upon Mathilde Wesendonck.

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"You will agree that for a woman in my position this was the most heroic thing it was possible to do. But the other husband and the other wife herself, when all is said and done, were not willing to accept the relations which my attachment to Richard had made me accept. He told me himself, with a torrent of words and exclamations, that the lady was angry, quite beside herself, indeed, because I had come back. In her jealous temper she could no longer endure my staying in their house. She desired that thereafter, only Richard should live there. Naturally that could not be. Poor Richard has two hearts. He is drawn the other way with a strong cord, but at the same time the bond of habit holds him to me."

For once Minna was about right. Richard did have two hearts. One was a heart of pity for the tactless and limited creature—who was also sick and unhappy—who had shared his existence for almost twenty-two years. The other was a heart of love for the young woman who was so lovely, so gifted, so delicate and so passionate, the woman whom he admired and whom he loved.

This situation had thrown him into a state of utter distraction. Between him and Mathilde

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was being played a drama even more tragic than those with which his genius had enriched the musical stage. They saw each other again, met each other again, wrote to each other, but in their meetings and in their letters they were now aware of the terrible obstacles which life, indifferent and inexorable, had put in the way of their union. A short note of Wagner's tells a great deal about their love and their woe—the woe of their love.

“That letter—how sad it made me. The demon is cast out of one of our hearts only to enter the other. How shall he be conquered? Oh, how much we are to be pitied! We no longer belong to each other. Demon, become God. Demon, demon, become God!”

He had written some measures of *Parsival*, who later as *Parsifal* was to climb so high toward heaven and proclaim in sublime accents the triumph of God over the Demon.

“Where shall I find thee, oh Holy Grail? My heart full of burning desire seeks thee.”

And he wished to send these measures to “his dear lost child” who at the very same moment was writing “beautiful and noble” verses to him. Their burning desires and their hearts sought

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each the other. But life always implacable stood between them.

Wagner had offered to Otto—who had refused it—to break off the relations between the two families. Did that refusal proceed from the new confidence of the husband, or the still commanding will of the wife? One may not know, but it only postponed the inevitable in an impossible existence through which Wagner desperate and angry “dragged himself in an incurable lassitude.” One morning he received from Mathilde “a marvelous and shining letter” the “supreme nobility” of which drew from him an answer which is the most moving of all his confessions:

What a great man he is. Surely he has defects—repulsive and laughable defects. Thus he shares in the weaknesses of human nature. But he ransoms himself from that slavery by a greatness, all of which is not revealed in his mighty music. He is acknowledged a poet and a thinker. But is it realized how admirable a writer he is in that correspondence of his which is one of the most varied and the most abundant, one of the richest and most suggestive records, that a man of genius ever wrote? His letters to Liszt, at once profound and exalted, are the song of

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friendship at the same time that they reveal the tendencies and the secrets of a new art.

His letters to Mathilde are the poetry of love, in which the high fever of his desires and the breathless emotion of his heart have found moving and lyric accents. They express—and with what sincerity—the very fullness of his emotional life. His genius and his heart, a heart which a sovereign love raises to the level of his genius, burst into flames in them and make them radiant. What woman ever inspired more beautiful cries, more ardent vows, more thrilling declarations! *Tristan* and these letters are Mathilde Wesendonck's title to immortality.

“How could I answer thee, if it were not in a manner worthy of thee,” Wagner wrote, after he had received, during the tempestuous hours which shattered the peace of The Retreat, “that marvelous and shining letter,” in which she told him in words that cast out doubt, the passion and the distress of her faithful love.

“The frightful struggles which we have gone through, how could they end otherwise than by a victory won over all our hopes, over all our desires? Did we not know, even in the most burning moments when we were clasped to each other,

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that this was our goal? To what other struggles can we still look forward? Verily, I feel in the very bottom of my soul, that we have seen the end.

“When, a month ago, I told your husband my decision to break all personal relations with both of you, I had—renounced you. Yet, I did not yet feel myself altogether clean. I was convinced that only a complete parting—or an absolute union—could save our love from the terrible extremities to which we have seen it exposed of late. So, over against the sentiment that our parting was necessary, stood the possibility of a union, if not willed, at least thought of. Out of that comes a strain upon our nerves which neither one of us can endure. I made my confession to you, and it appeared to us clear that every other possibility would have constituted a crime, the very thought of which was unbearable.

“But the necessity of renouncing each other, has in its nature another character. To the strain upon our nerves, succeeds a solution which brings calm. The last drop of egotism vanished from my heart, and my decision to resume my visits to your house was then the victory of the purest humanity over the last assault of personal



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desires. I wanted then only to calm, to reconcile, to console, to bring peace, and thus to gain for myself the one and only happiness which could still be mine.

“Never in all my life, have I felt so intensely and so terribly as during those last months.”

Wagner’s wife had come within an inch of dying—but she had not died. Between that shadow of death and the change that had come about in his relations with Mathilde, life had lost for Wagner all savor and all charm. He regretted the fair Retreat, that anchor to which he had made fast his happiness, and he felt in spite of the generous and cordial advances of the Grand Duke of Weimar that after he left his “paradise of delight” he could give nothing more to the world.

“For me to go away from here, means—to die. With such a wound in my heart, I could not even try to build a new hearth.”

“My child, I can imagine only one single salvation—and this can come to me only from the depths of my heart. It has a name. Peace. Absolute calm imposed on desire. Noble and worthy victory. To live for others—for others—that will be my one comfort. Let me, thou who art the dearest of all beings to me, on the ruins

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of this world of desire—let me still bring you salvation.”

To soothe that desire, to master it, to bury it under its own ruins Wagner informed Mathilde that he would come to her only on the days when, self-mastered, calm and serene, he could bring with him “the best of himself” the gift of his renunciation. “If thou seest me not for a long time, then—pray for me secretly. For then, know that I suffer.” The last months had made his hair turn white on the temples. A voice called him to that rest for which he had made the Hollander of *The Flying Dutchman* wish. He was ready to die, “with a shining and peaceful countenance and with the divine smile of a victory handsomely won. And no one ought to suffer when we are conquerors. Good-by dear angel, well-beloved.”

On August 17th, in the morning, he left The Retreat, since as a conqueror he must conquer in that matter also. “Good-by, good-by, my well-beloved” he cried to Mathilde in a last message, “I go calmly. Wherever I am, I shall be wholly yours. Keep The Retreat for me. Au revoir, Au revoir, dear soul of my soul, Good-by and—au revoir.”

# MATHILDE

## *Sacrifice*

“From this the world will learn the high and noble distress of the sublimest love, the laments of the most painful of earthly delights.”

(*Wagner: Journal. Venice, September 3, 1858.*)

WHEN he gave up The Retreat Wagner accomplished the greatest sacrifice of his life. For a few all too short months, he had known the blessing of peace, the joy of work,—happiness, love. Every morning he walked in the pretty little garden of the chalet, listening to the song of the thrush and reveling in the beauty of the flowers. He plucked a rose, and put it in a glass on his work table, and the perfume of that rose inspired him. Why did he go away? He felt that he was alone. She whom he loved, she who had given him her heart, was at once too near him and too far away.

The daily visits in which they had found such delight were no longer allowed them. Anything might serve as pretext for another painful incident. Their steps were watched. Jealousy spied upon them. Wagner, whose acute sensitiveness tortured him in the very midst of happiness,

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could not accommodate himself to a situation which kept him in perpetual turmoil. Life had become intolerable to him. The cheerful noise which his friends made in the house was so far from providing a distraction that it only accentuated his feeling of utter loneliness. He had not a creature left in whom he could confide. Liszt had promised to come to see him. He expected a little light from that visit,—advice, comforting words. But Liszt did not come. Left to himself and desperate, Wagner decided to go away.

His decision this time was final. He arranged with Otto for the cancellation of the lease, and with Hans von Bülow as his companion, he made his last visit to Mme. Wesendonck. The presence of the witness, brought along on purpose, somewhat embarrassed their farewells. Yet Mathilde could not conceal the suffering which Wagner's departure cost her. Her wounded pride had not quite recovered; she had not forgotten another visit, which had brought her hurt and unhappiness; but her heart was moved and she asked herself whether, under the urging of her injured pride she had not herself helped to make worse a situation which, after all, might have been saved. She even "accused herself of

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having been the cause of the misunderstanding." Alas, it was now too late to undo what had been done! Wagner had stayed on only for the sake of his guests, Hans and Cosima von Bülow. When they were gone, he must leave La Colline Verte.

It was a cruel uprooting. His Journal describes what he himself called his "flight." He never wrote pages more tragically moving. In his autobiography this decisive moment is described with a dryness and brevity sufficiently explained by the jealous and uneasy presence of Cosima, holding the pen. But, the Journal, written with spontaneous sincerity as the events occurred, lays bare the heart of the man, cruelly tortured by an experience which shattered his dearest hopes. He had dreamed (he says) that he would die in that house. Thither she whom he loved would come at that supreme hour "for the last time holding his head in her arms in sight of all the world and receiving his soul in a last kiss." Instead of that comforting death literally transposed to the opera—"It is I, it is I, sweet lover"—he left The Retreat like a fugitive to cast out the "demon" with whom he could live no longer. Where now should he die?

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His last night was one of anguish. A little before one o'clock, he thought he felt a kiss upon his brow, and after that heard a deep sigh. Was it she who had come? No, he had been the plaything of a dream. Unable to sleep, he got up, gave the last turn of the key to the last piece of luggage and waited for the day, the prey to an agitation that grew more terrible with each slow passing hour. When the sun rose behind the mountains, he looked "for the last time and a long time over there" without shedding a tear. But it seemed to him that the hair on his temples had turned whiter still.

His wife, with considerable parade of patient resignation, waited for him in the dining room to give him tea before he started. The break of a glorious day only made worse by contrast the sufferings which tore the heart of the poor little great man. In the garden, he did not look around. He walked like a blind man, his eyes dry and staring, without bestowing upon Minna a glance or a word. At the last moment Minna caught his hands and burst into sobs. He told her to "be patient and dignified, and take comfort as became a Christian." At that, she lost her temper, grew violent and poured out a torrent

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of bitter words. Wagner did not answer, or so he reports.

“I was profoundly serious, there was within me a terrible sadness and bitterness. But I could not weep. It was so that I went away. And then—I do not deny it—a feeling of calm stole over me, I breathed freely. I went away into the solitude. There I am at home. There I can love with all the strength of my nature.”

Thus he embarked upon a new life. But he carried his love with him. He had decided to establish himself in Venice. He stopped a week in Geneva to rest and collect his soul. Alone, out of reach of the curious and importunate, he enjoyed absolute silence. “It does me a great deal of good to be able not to talk” he said. Mathilde had sent him before his departure her own Journal, in which he found again the “divinity and depth of her nature.” Absent, she was even more dear to him. He remembered her struggles, her sacrifices, her “high and noble love—a miracle such as nature works only once in centuries.” That miracle had been touched and broken by a “rude and clumsy hand.”

He was puzzled and at a loss what to do. Take it all in all, were they not, he wrote, “the happiest

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of human beings? With whom would we change our lot?" At other moments less exalted, this lot appeared to him lamentable and uncertain. He wrote again: "Yesterday I was profoundly wretched. Why keep on living? Why live at all? Is it cowardice—or is it courage?"

In fact he mustered the courage—or cowardice—to keep on living. His fancy still drew him toward Venice, and to Venice Carl Ritter, who knew and loved the city, accompanied him. But Wagner did not get at first the impression he had hoped for. "The grave melancholy" of the old city, beautiful in decay, was not quite the antidote to the melancholy humor which was in himself. A few days sufficed to win him over to the charms of the "admirable object of art" which he had under his poet's eyes as he sat on the balcony of the Palazzo Danieli where he was lodged in a "rather theatrically furnished apartment." Presently solitude and silence mingled hopefully with his ever-present memories of Mathilde.

"Yes, I cling to the hope that I am to be healed by thee. Keep thyself for me,—which means keep me for my art! To live with my art, to console thee—that is my task, that is what my nature demands, my destiny, my will, my love. So am



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I thine. So thou too comest to be healed by me. Here *Tristan* will be finished—in spite of all the torments in the world. And with him, if I can, I too will be made whole, to see thee, to comfort thee, to make thee happy. This rises up in me as the most beautiful, the most sacred desire. Come brave *Tristan*, come brave *Isolde*! Help me, come to the rescue of my angel. Here your blood will be staunched, here your wounds will be healed.”

So Wagner wrote. But his “angel” did not write. *Isolde* did not tend the wounds of *Tristan*. It was through Frau Wille that Wagner received his news from Zurich. Deaf to the advice of her husband, Minna had undertaken herself the dismantling of the Wagner establishment. With solemn practicability she had gone to the length of advertising a sale in the newspapers—a sale “on account of sudden departure.” It is easy to imagine the scandal which this advertisement stirred up in a town where the gossips had not failed to loose their tongues already.

This tactless proceeding angered Wagner no less than it grieved the Wesendoncks. Nonetheless Mathilde was “resigned, calm, and resolved

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to go to the very end along the way of renunciation." Wagner had advised this resignation, this calm, this resolution. But in action the lady's calm, resignation and renunciation were not in the least to Wagner's taste. Frau Wille explained that her friend's attitude was adopted for the sake of "her family, her children and her duty." It is not hard to imagine how ill these middle-class reasons matched with the towering state of soul in the exiled lover—a state of soul which he called "divinely peaceful and grave." Had he ever thought of family, of children, of duty? He knew only that he loved, that he was loved, and that "in this world that which is lofty and proud must suffer." Through Frau Wille's letter he saw the great world full of people who would never understand Mathilde and himself—who never came near them except to separate them and add to their anguish. Madly he wished to cry aloud his bitterness—and his jealousy.

Mathilde had held out the hope that they might in the course of the winter see each other for a few hours in Rome. The suggestion exasperated him more than it tempted him. He wrote in his journal of September 10th, 1888: "To see thee

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and part from thee at once, for the satisfaction of another? Could I do it? Certainly not."

Mme. Wesendonck refused even to receive his letter. She sent it back unopened through Frau Wille. The cruel injustice of that refusal made him sad, but it also made him angry. He exclaimed:

"That,—thou shouldst not have done that,—no, not that!" Instead of getting news of her through the good friend they shared, he wanted something from herself, something direct—"three words, no more." With the tension between them what it was, the interposition of a third person, however friendly, galled him. None the less Mathilde persisted in using the good offices of the tried and discreet friend, who remained loyal to both of them in their separation. Mathilde did not charge Frau Wille with a letter to her lover, but she begged her friend to say for her that she loved him always.

The exile felt that he had a right, after that going away "of such dreadful memory" to feel "the least doubt cast upon his resigned affection" as a "grave wound"—an insult which he did not deserve. He suffered still from the terrible blow which had crushed "the sublime beauty" of his

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soul state. So the declaration of his mistress brought him, in the misery in which that blow had left him staggering, a "high sensation of happiness." Sure of getting on his feet again and winning his fight, he wanted to resume work on *Tristan*, and finish a "marvelous period" of his life. When he had finished that drama of love, he would look with a calm and clear regard across the world at the "good, pure, and beautiful creature" who had furnished his inspiration.

"With charming ingenuity" Mathilde had sent him a cup and service. That friendly sign, from far away—from so far away—brought them closer together. A month after his departure, still she had not written to him; "but in keeping silence thus" did they not say to each other better than it could have been said in words "that which at this pass had become inexpressible?" Little by little Wagner was won by the spell of Venice, where the nights and the songs especially pleased his fancy. He tasted the solitude of the place which was his "one consolation" and his "one salvation" although he loved to "pour out his heart without reflection and without reserve." Made up of contrasts as he was and even by his own confession "anti-natural" he found true joy

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only in his Art. As for Mathilde, she had her children. He no longer reproached her for anything. If he uttered a complaint, it was straightway hushed by the memory of the "divine letter" which Frau Wille had sent him. "Salute a thousand times on my behalf, my dear angel," he answered. "She must not despise the soft tear which wets my cheek."

Thus Wagner was sad and happy at once, he thrilled with feeling and ached with pity. He looked upon "the pain of the world" which moved him to write eloquent pages in his Journal, and inspired in him the profoundities which he was already promising himself to translate into musical expression in the third act of *Parsifal*. He read over again the pages which his beloved had given him at "the supreme moment" when she appeared "so exalted, so sincere, so purified by suffering." But he remembered too, the day, when believing herself misjudged and betrayed, she repulsed him, not because of her pain, but because passion swayed her. He was healed of his own trouble by the "terrible pity" which welled up in his heart at that spectacle. "Truly, I can forget my own self," he declared with his customary sublime lack of humor. "I can deprive

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myself for ever of the delight of seeing thee, of being with thee, I can hold to the single thought of bringing thee purity and peace, and of restoring thee to thyself." By sheer force of pity for her, thus, he felt that he lifted himself above her. If you listen to him "the community of joy," because it demands the most absolute sympathy, "is the topmost peak" which elect souls may attain.

However this pity of Wagner for Mathilde must not be confused with the pity which ordinary folks feel toward inferiors. "That was the cause of my last explanation to my wife. The unhappy woman had put her own interpretation on my decision never to cross again the threshold of your house and believed that this meant a break with you. She fancied that when she came back, peace and confidence would be born again between us. How frightfully I had to disappoint her! Now comes—peace—peace. Another world is going to be opened to us. Be blessed in it, and welcome to the eternal community of joy." Thus he wrote on October 1st.

Everything serves Wagner as occasion or pretext for confiding to his Journal the passionate fidelity of his love. He lives in it. All through

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his reading which is vast, and various—which explains the range and richness of his mind,—his thoughts are with Mathilde; he sees only her, with her and for her. When he reads Koeppen's, "History of the Religion of Buddha," he utters this cry, eloquent of his desire: "Happy Savitri! Thou mayest now follow thy well-beloved everywhere! Thou mayest abide by her side forever. Happy Ananda! She is with thee now, thy well-beloved, thou hast won her forever. Happy Ananda, happy Savitri!"

His Erard, "his beloved swan" has just come. He tries its wings in working out the notes which he had made for Mme. Wesendonck's songs, and he thinks very little in his work hitherto can equal this burning and tender music. Sometimes, with the purpose of bringing them into line with his conceptions of love and art, he tackles the highest questions of philosophy. He is never afraid that their abstractions will daunt his beloved. He knows that her rare intelligence embraces everything. Sometimes he calls up his memories of their joys and sufferings; his coming into "the harbor of refuge" the "gate of deliverance," and "the abundance with which she has given herself." After that "divine satisfaction" a new world ap-

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peared to him. He does not even feel any longer the need of a dwelling place aside. Is he not fortified, protected, soothed, by the "asylum"—"the inviolable, indestructible and eternal asylum" which he has found in the heart of his beloved? From that refuge he looks out upon the world with a smile of kindly compassion. He is no longer pursued by the yearning for solitude. His passion is appeased.

If he still suffers, it is because he does not know what form his relations with Mathilde will take hereafter. His fervent blessing goes with her in the task which she has assumed of bringing up her children, but for him—for him what fate does she reserve? There is the "point of his fear" and the "spearhead of his grief." Fate will decide. And perhaps they will find each other again in those very places in which they have suffered, "will know once more that delight of looks exchanged and hands pressed together, which lifted them out of the world and up to heaven."

Meantime, he returns to his *Tristan*. There he gathers his strength and finds new life in the "profound art of sonorous silence" which speaks in his name to his "divine liberator." Since his departure from The Retreat, though they had



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parted on good terms, Wagner had not written to Otto Wesendonck. A distressing event brought them together again. Otto announced to him the death of his son Guido, six years old. Wagner had been unwilling to stand godfather to the child,—urging that his doing so might bring ill-luck. When he heard of little Guido's sudden taking away, he was seized with remorse because of this refusal. He wrote a touching letter to Wesendonck, while the Journal gathered the full harvest of the quivering emotion of his pain. He let Frau Wille know that he planned to spend Christmas with his friends. The answer which he got from his confidant's husband was not encouraging. He was advised that there were so many malicious stories current about his flight that it would be wiser to stay away, so as not to furnish fresh food for evil tongues.

Before the boy's death Wagner had sent to Mathilde the Journal which he had kept since their separation. On her side she had noted her impressions and these notes she caused to be sent to him, with a letter which unchained a tempest in his heart.

"All is chimera—all is illusion," he wrote. "We are not made to recreate the world in our

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image. Oh dear and pure angel of truth! Bless you for your divine love! Oh, I know all. What wretched days have I lived through! What growing anguish, what infernal torments! The world had stopped, I could not breathe except in feeling your breath. Oh my sweet, sweet woman. My bitter tears flow, like a raging torrent. Will they make thee whole? They are the tears of my deathless love for thee. I know all, I understand all—I see clearly, quite clearly how things stand. It is enough to drive one mad. Let me make an end of it now—not to seek rest, but to plunge myself into the soft pleasure of my pain.”

Ideas of suicide dogged him. He awoke during the night of All Saints Day after excruciating tortures which shook his courage.

“I was on the balcony and was looking down at the Grand Canal with its black flood below me. A wild wind whistled about me. A leap, a fall—not a sound would have been heard! That leap would have delivered me from all my agony. I put down my hand to lift myself upon the balustrade.”

He drew back that rash hand. But what held him safe was not the thought of his art. It was the obligation of a love which he had never before

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felt so profoundly. His art was only a comfort to him, he brought to it in his tragic hours, the expression and the interpretation of his love. Mathilde dominated and guided his life. That was the thought which saved him. "With thee, I can do all things—without thee—nothing." She was the disposer of his sufferings and his deeds. He had absolute confidence in her greatness of soul. He begged her in the name of the "new right" which he had won over her on that fearful night to be the faithful helpmate of his misery.

Everything added to his distress. The news from Dresden told of the serious state of Minna's health. The situation between them had improved as usual when they were not together. Since they had parted the unhappy woman had seemed to soften and her letters showed much regard for her husband. Wagner had no idea of going back to her. He considered their separation as absolutely necessary, but he did not wish to fall short in any obligation to help her, and he counted on the heart of Mathilde, who was not very far away, to keep him informed and to lend her aid also.

So he paid "his life's debt." After an illness

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which kept him in his room for a week, a week busy with preliminary notes and sketches, he returned to his "swan" and resumed work on *Tristan*. He was still on the second act. Never had his inspiration been more burning, more fruitful, more passionate, than in these first days of December. His life inspired his work and his heart fed his genius. He was in a cyclonic state over it. "What music this is becoming!" We find him saying in his Journal: "I could consecrate all my existence to such music. Oh, it is getting to be deep and beautiful, and the most sublime and marvelous things embody themselves so easily in the idea. Never, till now, have I done anything like it. But I live entirely in this music. I cannot know—absolutely, I cannot—when it will be finished. I live eternally in it. And with myself."

When he wrote "And with myself," Wagner thought of this "myself" as what he had given so utterly to Mathilde, without whom he could do nothing and desired nothing. "No swan will help me if thou dost not help me." Helped, sustained, inspired by her, he ravished from the swan love's sublimest accents. Was he a fair judge of what he did? It was true, at least, that he had done

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nothing like it. Never, never would any genius be able to surpass the intoxicating spell, the breathless fever, the superhuman exaltation, which flowered in magic chords in *Tristan's* great duet. When he came to the passage in which the two lovers invoke the soft sweetness of night "Him thou has kissed, him upon whom thou hast smiled, in thine arms, mine own," Wagner remembered the melody in which he had enveloped the *Dreams* written by Mathilde. He did not resist that memory. Were not Mathilde and Isolde inextricably mingled in the heart they had subdued. "A severe critic will find the air reminiscent," he says, "the *Dreams* come back. But you will forgive me—darling. No, never be sorry for your love for me." This was written three days before Christmas, 1858.

The year 1859 was to bring about the meeting which Wagner could not contrive during the previous Christmas holidays. He had hailed the new year as the day after a long night. "Wilt thou bring me no message from her?" he asked. Mathilde sent him a fairy-tale, "*The Bird from Afar*," the symbolical meaning of which he easily disentangled. That tale reached him, by a sort of magic, at the moment when, with a gold

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pen in his hand which his beloved had given him, he was setting down the last measure which finished the score of the second act of *Tristan*. It was the passage where he indicated with insistent lagging notes the fleeting joy of that meeting again of the two lovers. He lived in a sort of enchanted atmosphere, happy in the power to work, victor over the world, sustained by his toil. His was "the meditative calm of the creator." Only the physical conditions of his existence distressed him. His sensitiveness,—a sensitiveness almost painful—called for the affectionate surroundings which would have held him a willing captive and wooed him with kindness. How long his sufferings had been, compared with his happiness?

"I can never more attain true joy," he said, "except when I reach the very pinnacle of my ascent." And he dreamed of the rock on which Siegfried finds Brünnhilde asleep.

But he drew nearer his goal in spite of the stumbling blocks which his material life strewed in the way. His wife "that poor anguished creature" was better, but she still suffered, and his attitude to her—he did not wish Mathilde to think otherwise—was altogether one of "tender care for her, consideration for her, indulgence to

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her.” But he found his only salvation in his beloved, “his dear child,” from whom he never wished to part, so his letter concluded, except “with the palms of peace in his hands. There my crown of thorns rests in the immortal perfume of my roses. Laurels do not tempt me. Peace—Peace be with us.” It is all operatic—melodramatic. But that is Wagner.

It grew cold in Venice, one shivered in the gondolas, and Wagner who could no longer take his walks among his own beloved hills and valleys, looked sadly on clear days, toward the Tyrolese Alps sparkling in the distance. Toward the end of February he was already thinking of moving on to Lucerne. He had “succeeded perfectly” with the second act of *Tristan*, “a fine thing” which threw into the shade “all his poor works of the past” and he was preparing to finish the preliminary draft of the third act when an injury to his leg compelled him to break off work. He left Venice in the last week in March. His friends in Zurich had each of them done him acts of kindness. He thanked Wesendonck for his “practical provision” and Mathilde for attending to the certain details of business. He invited both of them to visit him at the Sweitzerhoff in

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Lucerne, where with his usual weakness for luxurious surroundings—necessary for his work, as he thought—he expected to install himself with considerable splendor. In fact, however, it was Wagner who went to spend some days with the Wesendoncks. He says briefly in the autobiography that the meeting was “melancholy but without any embarrassment.” It was like the dream of a dream. Nothing seemed real. His letter written to Mathilde, April 4th, says more, but leaves the same impression. Had he seen clearly? Had she recognized him? It seemed to him that “thick mists had parted them—mists through which they hardly heard the sounds of each other’s voices”—and that it was a ghost who had entered in his stead into that house to which he had desired so eagerly to return. Yet he was not dismayed. He realized that such a return was “the way to sanity” and he spoke out his thought thus:

“Where we are, we do not see each other, only where we are not do our eyes meet.” So the present does not exist, the future is nothing. Must they then by death live in the past, live on the past? He put love above glory and he did not think that his work was worth keeping him-



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self alive for. "But thou thy children—Let us live." Already suffering had written its record on the face of his beloved and he shuddered when he lifted to his lips her hand "grown so thin." A voice told him his duty—a "noble duty to fulfill." The "marvelous strength of their love" had extinguished in him "the fire of bitterness and suffering." It was she who had managed that return. It was she who guided anew the steps of the exile to La Colline Verte. "I may from now on kiss the threshold which has permitted me to come back to you. I have faith in that strength. It will teach me again to see thee clearly, to see myself clearly through the veil of expiation which we have thrown over ourselves. Oh blessed saint! Have faith in me. I will have the strength to endure."

When he returned to Lucerne in heavenly weather, Wagner who was always analysing himself, began to check up his impressions. He was happy again, but he was surprised that he felt no surprise at being so. It was "the child who taught the master." Mathilde with her woman's instinct had understood and had written him that they had been able to make a holiday of that meeting again because there had really

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been no parting. "It was as if we had seen each other only an hour ago." Having escaped death, Wagner was now enjoying the "unshakable serenity of an eternal youth." He had faith in the end of *Tristan*, whose inspirer he had just seen once more. He played over to himself the second act, in which love rises to the dizzyest heights, and he was shaken by it to the depths of his being. "The most intense fire of life leaps up in it," he said, "with such a flame that it burned me; it almost consumed me. When the fire dies down toward the end of the act, when the soft light of a transfigured death begins to shine through the blaze, peace returned."

He spoke of his music as he spoke of his love. Could he do otherwise, since one was only the magnificent transposition of the other. He was the Tristan, the passionate and exalted Tristan of that sublime Isolde in whom he brought to life again his dear Mathilde. The "supreme flowering" of his genius was so lavish that it could, without effort, spare out of its rich store the flower which was to perfume the third act. He believed that he would invent nothing new. But does love not renew itself always? Life was his and it lifted him very high. "My child," he

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wrote, "that *Tristan* is getting to be something terrible! That last act!" Recall the moment when Kurvenal says to Tristan, "Thou art now on thine own lands—the country of thy delight warmed by the old sunshine—here things will go well with thee—thou shalt escape from death and be healed of thy wounds." Wagner could not compose that moving passage without feeling the tears stream down his cheeks. "It is an incredible tragedy," he said. "It overwhelms everything."

The secret of that prodigious music is that Wagner put his whole life into it. Like the music of Beethoven, so great and so dear to the younger composer, it comes from the heart, and it goes to the heart. When men of such genius reach the summit, their souls, whether torn with sorrow or radiant with joy, endure the ascent. Wagner's only inspiration was the vision of his world within. He knew the illusion and the misery of the life without. Outside of his love he is gloomy and uneasy, dissatisfied with his work. He cannot work on order. He says:

"One must pay one's own way. Nothing enters into us which does not find sympathetic response there. If one gets to the end of what he

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has, the end comes, whether one patches up the outside or not."

Happily Wagner is not at the end and patches are not needed. He still exchanges frequent visits with the Wesendoncks. The end has not come. However, his letters do not breathe the same gladness. They are like the words of Kurvenal sounding as hollow accents over the unconscious Tristan. There are for the composer long days of discouragement, of weariness, of doubt, moments when his art does not move him any longer to complete forgetfulness of himself—to the point of being intoxicated with it. Then suddenly he finds himself again. His life revives; he rides the crest.

"Child, child!" he writes, "dearest child. It is a terrible tale. The master has wrought well again." "That devil of a fellow, Richard," as he called himself, had just played the first half of that last act of *Tristan* and he tasted a satisfaction like God's own when he had created the world. He finds that "all is good, all excellent—their neither tedium or monotony—on the contrary, a passionate life overflowing with gladness." He has never done anything like it. Mathilde will be pleased, but in order to finish

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the second half he needs her—her only. “Come to my aid,” he cries, “nobody else can be of any use. They are all stupid, there, all—all!” Mathilde answers his call. He will continue to do his best so as to bring her, as proof of his gratitude, the red portfolio which will contain the whole opera. In his emotions as he works the past is confounded with the present. Roses in full bloom in a little garden, remind him of The Retreat.

“Summer, sun, the smell of roses—and good-byes.” But the anguish has passed, nothing makes him sad any more or desolates him; he is really cheerful. “My existence is altogether unrelated to time and space. I know that I will live as long as I have still anything to create, so I take no thought of life—I only create.” He sacrifices himself with his prisoners, Tristan and Isolde, in order ere long to enjoy with them the freedom which he will give back to them.

When Mathilde comes to see him at Lucerne he abandons the amorous operatic pair to play for her Bach, to whom he has never felt nearer. With Mathilde he feels the awakening of the best that is in him. With men, who never want to give up anything of the egotism of their opinions,—

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even with his friends, even with Liszt—there is always something which jars. She alone has all his faith and all his heart. She turns on in his soul the fountains of the good and the beautiful, and he is never entirely happy unless she is satisfied. Then he jests, he teases, he has a good time. There is a playful child in the Titan.

At the beginning of August 1859, the immortal work was done. The melancholy end had plunged Wagner into a sentimental ecstasy. When he had read the poem to Mathilde Wesendonck two years before, she had been cruelly moved by the last act. He told her to soothe her that such a situation could, in the best of circumstances, have no other issue, and that was the opinion of Cosima von Bülow. It is well to take note of this touch, which gives a hint of the true character of the two women whose parts were so enormously important in Wagner's life as a lover.

*Tristan* was finished; summer had come to Lucerne. Wagner must move on. He decided to go to Paris for a while, and have his wife join him there. She had been away from him for a year and seemed from the tone of her letters to have learned that she must adopt a new attitude.

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But—as usual—where was he to get the needed funds? Wagner had returned to Otto Wesendonck the money which the latter had offered to enable him to work on the *Ring*. He desired now neither a loan nor a present, but he took the initiative in proposing to his friend a business deal which consisted in the cession, for a round sum of 24,000 francs, of the perpetual proprietary rights to the “theatrical work, in verse and music, called the *Ring of the Nibelung*.” Was that too much to ask? Wagner’s judgment was that his tetralogy appealed less to the contemporary generation than it would to posterity, and was therefore marked for a “success which would be progressive and perhaps belated.” Thus the rights could not profitably be acquired except by a wealthy person with heirs to reap the future benefits. On this basis Otto accepted the proposed arrangement.

Before leaving for Paris Wagner spent three days with the Wesendoncks and was treated, he says, with great consideration.

His stay in Paris, lasted from September 1859 to August 1861, and belongs with curious totality to his life as artist. There was nothing—or nothing is known of anything—in that interval

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which is important in his life as a lover. It was not without much hesitation that Minna had decided to come and join him again.

"There are a lot of people," she said, "who envy me my privilege of having a great artist for a husband, but how much happier I should be if they could envy me for having a good and faithful husband." Her jealousy of the past, of that so recent past, when she had discovered "her husband's burning passion for another woman" soon found expression in sarcasm and hints which drove Wagner beside himself. His home was a hell.

During these Paris years, years of struggle and anxiety, he continued to write to Mme. Wesendonck. Beneath the storm-tossed surface of his hard existence, he had inside "a deep calm," the credit of which he gave to her. "I am what I can be—by your grace, my friend." He asked her help in the domestic organization of his house. He kept her informed about all his affairs, his connections, his hopes and his disappointments. His gratitude and his faithfulness were not unrewarded. At his request she had sent him a photograph of La Colline Vert. That "sweet picture of innocence and peace" caused him sin-



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cere emotion. Mathilde's letter helped him. "As soon as I hear from you, I see myself adorned. Everything—and myself—seems to me noble then. I feel that I am saved. My children—that we should be three! Here is a great marvel. It is matchless. It is my greatest triumph and yours. We are masters of our humanity, in an incredible fashion, and from a great height."

On December 19, 1859, to celebrate the birthday of the "dear child," he sent her the mysterious and calming finale of *Tristan*.

In the spring the Wesendoncks traveled in Italy. That absence reduced the number of letters from Mathilde. Wagner pitied himself because he missed the "magic lamp" which lighted and enchanted his life. He wrote:

"You know that nothing else makes me happy. Nothing but to be concerned with you. I have nothing more in the world but you. I live for you, by you and with you. The game has no more interest for me, except that it gives me an excuse to tell you my troubles and have you receive my complaints so sweetly. Good-by, my child."

When Mathilde replies to these wailings, he is really comforted, soothed. She is the confidant

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of his Art. He has raised her to his own level, and he writes to her many pages of touching beauty—pages which tell all the secrets of a troubled and complex soul. The ardors of his passion have died down—or rather he has compelled them to a duller glow, but his loving confidence goes always to her whom he names “angel of my rest and guardian of my life.” Everything else vanishes at the thought of seeing her again, were it for an hour, and of looking into her eyes. For her part, she is so used to the most delicate attentions from him that she is hurt when she has a letter forwarded to her without an accompanying word. He answers her:

“Has silence lost its meaning for you?” and two months later writes again: “Ah my child, if I did not have you my lot would be most pitiable. Believe that always and firmly.”

After the failure of *Tannhäuser* in Paris, Wagner went to Vienna where he hoped to get *Tristan* produced. He received there a photograph of Mathilde Wesendonck “the noble, the superb child”—with which he was delighted. “Oh, my child,” he wrote, “how lovely you are. Words fail me. Yes, in that heart all must be made royal. The most wretched beggar who

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dwells there must soon feel his head swim among the clouds. The pains of the noblest child-birth are written on those cheeks which used to wear so childish a smile. Yes, God himself now lives in that child. Bend low before her." This was written September 28, 1861.

Wagner's love for Mathilde was not dead. It assumed paternal airs but at bottom, it had not changed. It remained "the apex and the sweetness of his life." When the musician opens the big portfolio which contains the earlier drafts of *Tristan*, he shivers "to the tips of his nerves" when he finds the song out of which grew the night scene of the second act. That song pleased him in another fashion than the "superb" scene itself, and appeared to him even more beautiful. "And to carry in the heart such a memory without being happy? How could that be? I closed the portfolio, but I opened the last letter with the portrait, and a cry escaped from me—Forgive—forgive—I will not repeat it."

What cry had escaped him, if not the cry of love, of soft desire, of mad passion? No, the love of Wagner for Mathilde was not dead. Absence had exalted it. It was the meeting again of the two lovers which gave it its quietus.

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They met in October in Venice. The Wesendonck household were on a pleasure trip. Wagner was invited to come and rest after his troubles in Vienna, where he had not been able to get *Tristan* performed. The best intentions went wrong. After four melancholy days Wagner left Venice abruptly. His going surprised his hosts. What had happened? Wagner had always cherished the illusion that some day he might return to The Retreat and live there near Mathilde. A talk with her now revealed the truth to him. What he had hoped was impossible. How in his presence could his mistress protect the liberty which must be hers as wife and mother? "Only my being far away can give you the power to move freely as you will. One must have nothing to pay, in order to have to submit to no conditions. I cannot bear to see you as the price of my being near you, held apart, oppressed, dominated, dependent, for I cannot repay you for the sacrifice. My being near you can no longer give you anything, and the thought that the wretched little good that I can get for you has been bought at the price of all liberty, of all true human dignity, would make me feel my very nearness a punishment.

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“No illusion is left.”

For Wagner it was a cruel disappointment, “which weighed like lead upon his soul” at Venice. \*Whatever effort he made to lessen the bitterness of the dose, he could not altogether conceal his feelings. The two letters which he wrote to Mathilde from Paris toward the end of December 1861 have sentences whose spirit, read between the lines, is one of disillusioned irony.

“Live in peace, learn and teach. You have patience, I too have learned it. I take this comfort that you have tastes and a social position which make it possible to give your sufferings a sweet and idyllic form.”

Venice, the return, and the three weeks which followed were a terrible ordeal for Wagner. He reflected upon himself and his love. The result was expressed in a few words: “Now only, am I really resigned.” He had taken a long time to arrive at that state of resignation. Even now was it final? Four months before his visit to Venice, Mathilde had sent him a long letter—a gay and tender letter, charming and serious, in which she said she was sorry she could not breathe into his soul a rosy glow stolen from the twilight glories of the Alps, all ablaze before her as she

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wrote. "Now the darkness is coming on, the mountains are pale and dead: all is silence. May calm, the calm, and the holy peace descend upon your heart."

Peace—outward peace—came to that ardent heart only at the price of painful sacrifice. If Wagner sacrificed his love, the masterpiece which that love inspired remained as the sublime witness of what had been. "That I have written *Tristan*" he said to Mathilde, in his letter of December 20th, "is the thing for which I thank you from the deepest depths of my soul for all eternity." No woman was ever honored with more splendid love-token. Mathilde Wesendonck was worthy of it. She will live through the ages in the immortality of *Tristan*.

## Chapter V

### BYWAYS OF LOVE

DURING his stay in Venice the crushed and disappointed Wagner had by his own account been rescued from the depths by Titian's "Assumption." That masterpiece brought him back to art. Years ago he had outlined the scenario of an opera-comique in three acts, the *Meistersinger*, and given it to Mathilde Wesendonck. Under her inspiration, or on his own initiative, but certainly with her consent, he now determined to write this opera. From Venice he went to Nuremberg, and then established himself in Paris in an inexpensive hotel on the Quai Voltaire, where he found the quiet he needed.

"I have thrown myself again," he wrote Mathilde, "into the arms of my old mistress. Work has won me back, and now I cry out to it — 'Make me forget, so that I may live.' " That old mistress (who did not, however, cut him off from less ideal acquaintances), was kind to him.

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His libretto and several melodies were written—in the midst of laughter and tears—in a month. He sent the manuscript to Mathilde and she sent back a bronze paper-weight, bought for him in Venice. It represented the Lion of St. Mark, with his paw resting on the Bible. Wagner understood this discreet exhortation to perseverance and resignation, and in order to compose the music for the piece, he leased in February, 1862, a big lonely house at Biberich on the Rhine, near Mayence.

It seemed to him that it was the sort of quiet place for a task which would take some time to accomplish. Suddenly, as he was just getting settled, Minna turned up. He had not in the least expected her. She had not accompanied him to Vienna, nor had she been with him during his last stay in Paris. After all the deplorable incidents of the past, he was unwilling to try over again the oft-repeated experiment of living with her unless he was sure of an occupation which brought in a regular and sufficient income and enabled him to live in a pleasant place—to afford the things, in short, which appealed to Minna's tastes and gave her contentment and happiness.



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"Come, old friend," he wrote, "now at last we are going to have a good time for a while."

Minna had no great faith in that good time. On the eve of the 25th anniversary of their marriage she had received from her husband a gold bracelet and "leave for a whole year." The present did not dispell the gloom of a solitary anniversary.

"If only I could blot out those twenty-five years from my life," she wrote, "then, perhaps, I could find a little happiness again."

What had brought her to Biberich? It may be suspected, on evidence furnished by Wagner himself, that it was not merely the desire to bring him comfort and to give her help in setting his new house in order. He received her well enough. But they could not agree about the furnishings—what was hers and what was his; and, on the top of that, fate played an unexpected trick. One of Mathilde Wesendonck's letters, which had been following Wagner about in his wanderings without catching up with him, arrived during Minna's stay. There was also a little box containing some trifles for Christmas.

It was a purely friendly letter which praised the plan of the *Meistersinger* and gave her bless-

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ing to the work recommenced. Mathilde said she was afraid the present "upon which she had worked with infinite pleasure and furious haste" would not reach Wagner in time. Finally she thanked him for a letter received. "It brings me your handwriting at least, even if the old-time sublimity of feeling is absent." Minna got very angry about it.

Again she refused to see in her husband's relations with Mathilde anything but "a base and trivial intrigue" and her brutal way of putting it made Wagner angry in his turn. He was furious at hearing, after four years, in an outburst of mad jealousy, "the same wild talk, word for word, expressed in the same low and hateful tone." Unable to explain things to each other or to understand each other, the pair, shut up together in their solitary house, saw the beginning of the same old thing—suspicions, distrust and endless rows. There was a ten day reign of terror. Wagner, for mere pity's sake, was unwilling to proceed to a legal separation, but he decided that his wife must return to Dresden where, as a sop to public opinion, she was to make a point of having a room set aside for him—a room which he might even occupy now and then.

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When Minna left, "still angry and hostile," Wagner felt profoundly depressed. But he had learned that any weakness on his part would only make worse a situation already intolerable.

"My God!" he wrote, "my eyes were full of tears and I said: 'How greatly I need now a loved one,—a woman who sweetly consents to receive me into her heart. And that is just what I have cut myself off from forever by my determination with regard to my wife. By that, surely, all Minna's sufferings are amply avenged.'"

In fact, Minna did not have this revenge. Besides, did she really desire it? Her husband's decision sent her away from him, but he continued to be too much "the adorer of women" not to become entangled, through his senses or his heart, with those whom the chances of his whirlwind existence threw in his way. An incorrigible school-boy, he was still, in spite of his fifty years, ardent and inflammable. He was involved in all sorts of love affairs and intrigues till the day when he fell into the hands of the superior woman who was to pin him down and dominate the twenty last years of his life.

At Mayence, Frau Schott, wife of his pub-

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lisher, gave him as a dinner partner one evening a young girl, named Mathilde Maier, whose mental gifts seemed to single her out for such an honor. This new Mathilde was the daughter of an ex-notary, who had left very little money behind him. She lived modestly with her mother, two aunts and a sister, and ran the household admirably. She was the soul of the family. Her good sense was combined with great tact and rare distinction of mind. She was frank, well educated and a lover of the arts, and she pleased Wagner at once. He proceeded to engage with her in an innocent "domestic idyll." The young woman's soothing graciousness was just what he needed after his violent scenes with Minna. He visited the new Mathilde in her home. The peaceful surroundings, with everything in order, and everybody in a good humor were largely the result of the girl's clever management. They made a conquest of the composer, who was at the moment busy with the *Meistersinger* and who used Mathilde Maier as the model for the youthful purity of Eva.

The second Mathilde, charming and reposeful, did not stir up in his soul the same passion as the first. But she left her gracious memory in the

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masterpiece which, in a different mood, may be compared to *Tristan*—for its sustained perfection and the flow of its inexhaustible vitality. Wagner, who went to Mayence almost every week, never failed to go to see the Maier family, where a bite and a sup regularly awaited him. He met Mathilde not only at home but outside. The young woman knew many people and Wagner owed to her his acquaintance with one of Schopenhauer's friends, with whom he could discuss at length the great philosopher who still exercised a powerful influence upon his mind.

Sometimes Mathilde, accompanied by a friend older than herself, went home to Biberich with Wagner. Sometimes he escorted her to Mayence. The girl whose proper maidenly behavior discouraged the suspicions of the evil-minded, looked after his lonely hearth more or less. On the evening of May 22nd, the artist's birthday, she did the honors of the house—she and her sister and her friend Louise—for the neighbors he had invited. And she did it very well—though the equipment furnished was meagre. She also gave six rose bushes in bloom to Wagner who had cherished ever since the days of *The Retreat*

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a special fondness for roses. This attention increased her charm in his eyes.

Was he less sensible than Hans Sachs in regard to Eva and did he let himself dally with the temptation to marry Mathilde? He does not confess so much, but it is the less presumptuous to attribute to him such a design—or at least a secret inclination that way, because Minna back in Dresden was making a frightful nuisance of herself. She wrote and reproached him in ugly language with “all sorts of alleged misconduct” towards herself. Nothing less than the serious threat of divorce could keep her quiet. She was jealous of the past. But she had really nothing to fear from the present—at least, not from Mathilde Maier. The girl knew that she was doomed to deafness by an hereditary malady and would not have been willing to unite her fate with that of the musician to whom she had devoted her loyal affection and her fervent admiration.

There was another danger for Minna. While Wagner pursued his “domestic idyll” with Mathilde, he was at the same time not insensible to the more incendiary charms of an actress at the Frankfort theater. This actress was Fred-

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ericke Meyer, sister of the Mme. Dustmann whom he had selected to create the rôle of Isolde at the Vienna Opera. According to Peter Cornelius, Wagner's friend, Fredericke, without being pretty, had a lively countenance and a lot of sense. Wagner heard her in a comedy in which, he said, she "showed a lightness of touch and a finesse unusual in a German actress." In short, his impression of her was highly favorable—and he did not fail to let her know about it. He wanted particularly to see her in Calderon's *Public Secret*—for he was an admirer of the Spanish author—and he asked her to let him know when the next performance of the piece would be given. This performance did not take place. But *Don Gatierre* was put on and Fredericke gave her admirer due notice.

Wagner repaired to Frankfort where he "learned to know that interesting artist." He liked her better in her sentimental scenes than in those of pathos, for which she was not quite adequately endowed, but on the whole he was pleased. Anybody who knows anything about Wagner can be sure that this favorable artistic impression was accompanied by a personal declaration. The young woman, who was the mis-

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tress of the director of the theater, was not cruel. She promised to come to see Wagner at Biberich. This, by the way, was not the first time that Calderon had played a part in Wagner's love affairs. He had read many of the plays with Mathilde Wesendonck in the happy days of *The Retreat* and he cherished the dear memory.

"My child," he wrote to Mme. Wesendonck in April 1861, "where is the happiness of those days with Calderon? What evil star has driven me from my only rightful refuge. Believe me, whatever else the bells say to you—when I left that *Retreat* my star was doomed to fall. I can do nothing but keep on falling. Never, never, think otherwise. Hold to that one thought. I do not complain—I do not accuse. It had to be so. But in order to be fair to me always, remember that also, always. That—I want to say it to you again—that you must stamp indelibly upon your mind."

When he entered thus in advance, this plea of extenuating circumstances for his fall, Wagner was not thinking of the incident which was going to throw him into the arms of Fredericke Meyer—for he did not then know Fredericke. But would he have written to Mathilde Wesendonck



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differently if he had wished to excuse himself to her for this very intrigue? He shows a natural discretion as to the character which the affair assumed. But it is not hard to infer from his own account what is more bluntly stated by Peter Cornelius.

“Wagner,” says Peter, “behaved toward Fredericke with the most perfect propriety in the presence of others. And since he must always be engaged in some intrigue of that sort, my impression is that he is getting along very well with her.” He got along so well, in fact,—receiving Fredericke at Biberich or traveling with her to Frankfort and Vienna—that he excited the jealousy of her tituler lover, M. Guaita, and the indignation of her sister Mme. Dustmann, who put her own interpretation upon the intimacy. According to the innocent Wagner:

“It was impossible to make her understand the true state of things. She insisted that the conduct of her sister disgraced the family—that by coming to Vienna Fredericke compromised Mme. Dustmann herself.” What Mme. Dustmann thought—and said—in Vienna, Frau Schott thought and said at Mayence. In fact, everybody about Wagner said the same. And you

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have only to read his autobiography to agree with them.

At the beginning of autumn, Wagner was summoned to Vienna for the rehearsals of *Tristan* which were being resumed. On the way he stopped at Dresden, where he saw Minna. She had fitted up with the taste she knew how to use in such things a convenient and comfortable flat. She hoped by this means to get hold of him again and keep him. For herself she had reserved a little room opening on the courtyard. She had taken the wise precaution of inviting at the same time Wagner's sister Clara, who was both discreet and sympathetic, so that discussions between the pair were avoided—those discussions which would not have failed to degenerate into quarrels and violent scenes as usual. Wagner passed four quiet days with Minna, who gathered her husband's friends together in her drawing room to hear the *Meistersinger* read. She escorted him to the railway station and bade him "a very pathetic good-by, with the bitterest presentment that she would never see him again." It was, in fact, their last meeting.

Wagner now had to give up the Biberich house, because the owner wished to live there him-

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self. On his return from a series of concerts in Russia, the composer was lucky enough to find a place to his liking at Penzing near Vienna. It was a large floor in a smiling house with a fine shady garden of which he had the sole use. He settled himself there in May, 1863, with an excellent couple in charge of his domestic arrangements. These were Franz Mrasrek and Anna, his wife, who for long years shared devotedly his restless existence.

Although he had nothing but praise for Anna's intelligence and character, he needed other "feminine attentions." He tried to get Mathilde Maier to come. But her mother made a loud outcry at the offer—which was naturally disconcerting to her middle-class notions. She assumed a good deal more than was meant, and Wagner was informed that he could get a divorce first, after which there might be further discussion. It was clear he had made a mistake. He reassured by a frank explanation, the friendly family which had got by his own fault so wrong an idea of his intentions.

On the other hand, Fredericke Meyer, to whom "for a number of reasons," as he said, he could not extend the same invitation, had mani-

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fested a wish to see him again. Was it because he had left her "almost bald and horribly thin" that he did not grant her request? She repeated it. He gave her a rendezvous at Carlsruhe, but that "original and interesting friend," over whom M. Guaita most certainly had prior rights, did not reply and Wagner saw her no more.

As soon as he was settled at Penzing, Wagner began to turn longing eyes toward Zurich. On June 5th, he addressed his friend Frau Wille. He announced his intention to write "once more and finally" to the Wesendoncks, but through the husband only. "The wife, I love too much, my heart is too sore, too full, when I think of her. Less than ever can I write to her in the form which is now imperiously required of me. What my heart feels, I cannot write to her without making myself guilty of treason toward her husband, whom I respect and greatly esteem. What then shall I do?"

Wagner wrote to Frau Wille as one who at least knew his position. And he said to her: "She is and she remains my one and only love. I feel it more and more clearly. It was the high point of my life. The years of excitement and happy anguish which I passed amid the growing

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charms of her presence and of her affection hold all the sweetness of my existence. I feel it, she will always be admirable to me, and my love will never grow cold, but to see her; that is no longer allowed me without the awful constraint, which necessary as I know it is, would bring the death of our love. What can I do now? Shall I let my well-beloved think—what is not true—that she has become indifferent to me? That is very hard. Cannot you get that false idea out of her head? Would that be well? I do not know. Yet in the end, life will reach its conclusion. It is a wretched state of things.”

Love was not dead—what misery! To the distress of his heart, were added for Richard Wagner the growing embarrassments of his financial position. The very day after his letter to Frau Wille, he confided these embarrassments to Otto Wesendonck, and asked his help. Need we be surprised? Need we be indignant? With any other man the answer would be that he was conscienceless or worse, perhaps. With Wagner, the act—duly considered and determined—proceeded from a principle. Yes, a principle which he practiced shamelessly and even with pride. Since he had voluntarily become a Buddhist, he

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accepted—as he publicly proclaimed—the Buddhist doctrine of alms.

“Religious devotees,” he says, “go their ways about the cities and the streets of men. They show themselves naked, and have nothing. Thus they provide the faithful with the precious opportunity to accomplish the noblest and the most meritorious of works, by giving to them—by bestowing alms. The taking of these alms becomes a special grace—a grace in which is the merit of the blessing and the uplift which it brings to those who give the alms.”

Thus the taking of alms becomes eventually a favor which the beggar bestows upon the giver. It was this Buddhist doctrine which Wagner set forth in Venice, February 22, 1859, in a letter to Mme. Wesendonck. He applied it on June 6, 1853, when he asked Otto to help him “set himself up in the best possible style in the dwelling place finally selected. Because, after all, you are the only ones to whom I belong in some sort here below. Things are that way—there is no beginning over again.” However, he was less proud than the Buddhist beggar, he thanked his friends for the suffering and the sacrifices—theirs not his

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—in right of which he could claim to belong to them.

Love was not dead in his heart. Did it live still in the heart of Mathilde? Almost at the same moment when Wagner was writing these letters she was confiding to her muse her distress and her sacrifices.

*“Oh my heart, how great would be thy pain  
“If thou wer’st pure as the flower.”*

“I have dug a grave;—I have buried my love there  
—And all my hope and all my desires—<sup>2</sup>All my tears—  
And all my happiness and all my pain.—And when they  
were gently laid to rest,—I went down myself into the  
grave.”

Each loved the other—and each was resigned. On June 28th, Wagner wrote to her of his restlessness, his sadness, his homesickness. “I sigh for a presence, because nothing but a presence can bring me peace. Believe me, the God of happiness and of peace is named *presence*. Yes. Now it must be managed without presence. I cling first of all to the men who serve me and love me.”

He clung also to the women who served him.

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His heart was not so tired of life as he said it was, and it was particularly tired of solitude. He was possessed by an intense desire for a "family atmosphere." He had taken into his service a seventeen-year-old girl belonging to good people, to make his tea for him, keep his things in order and be his companion at dinner and in the evening. Though she was gentle and obliging, the poor child was bored to death, and wanted to go back to the city. He put her elder sister in her place. "She has more experience than the other, she is better poised, has gentle ways and is not disagreeable. I intend to try her out."

The try-out was successful, if we may believe the letter in which, after an extended round of concerts, he announced his home-coming to his "dear little Mariette" and told her to make preparations. "And you, my precious little treasure—do not fail to perfume everything properly: buy the very best kinds so that the room will smell nicely. My God, how delighted I am to rest at last once with you in our nest. I hope the little pink pyjamas will be ready too—will they not? Yes, yes. Only be very pretty and kind. I really deserve a little pleasure after all. I leave it to you entirely to decide whether



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you ought to come all the way to the station to meet me. But perhaps it would be still nicer if you received me at home—in the warm room. A thousand kisses to you, my treasure. See you soon.”

So the letter runs on.

In the course of the round which brought him back to this “precious little treasure,” Wagner had met Mathilde Maier at Carlsruhe and spent a day as her guest at Mayence. “I was coddled and spoiled to the limit,” he writes. He went part of the way to Zurich, too, but although he had spoken openly to the hosts of The Retreat of his situation, it did not occur to them to lend him the assistance he expected. His debts overwhelmed him. The money-lenders took advantage of his helplessness and he could do nothing to gain time but replace by short term notes those which had fallen due.

No saviour answered his call. It was all that his friends could do to scrape together in March, 1864, enough money to enable him to decamp to Switzerland. He wrote to Otto Wesendonck, who refused flatly to take him into his house. He had better luck with Frau Wille who received him cordially and installed him in quarters previ-

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ously occupied by her sister, Frau Bissing. But there was no furniture. Mme. Wesendonck, placed in possession of the facts by her friend, supplied furniture and even a piano. She and her husband came to see Wagner and found him ill—not having been able to put off the visit.

“The household seemed,” he writes, “to be going through a critical period of trouble the cause of which I partly surmised—though my bearing to them remained unchanged on that account.”

What was the cause of the troubles and why does Wagner make a mystery of it? Otto had been ill. It seems that his illness had made him irritable. He wished to rent *The Retreat*. On the other hand, Wagner’s requests for money had exasperated him and it is certain that there had been sharp passages between them upon this subject.

Their correspondence is non-existent between June 6, 1863, and July 31, 1865. Two years silence. But the exchange of letters between Wagner and Mme. Wesendonck went on till the end of 1863. Mathilde’s letters, in spite of their veil of discretion, preserve a tone of faithful friendship which the musician’s “strangely bitter gloom” does not avail to destroy. It was her

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tears which had protected The Retreat from the intrusion of new tenants. She proposes to Wagner to return for a while to La Colline Verte "to let the child take care of him and then talk of other things." She reproaches him for using a tea service which she has not given him. "You are cruel and mean to deprive me of the happiness of sending another. Don't you know that to satisfy your little wants is my one consolation for your poor miserable letters, and that you ought to leave me that at least."

But doesn't she know—or rather doesn't she know only too well—that Wagner's wants are more than that? And has she not, even if Frau Wille has not confided in her, penetrated the secret of his despair? What can she do? She has the "melancholy joy" of saving "the little house" which has now become her special care. "For the heart everything is important here. He remains the idealist always, and the world has no hold on him. He opens himself with a golden key, and escapes when the world fancies that it has him safe in hand."

Has Wagner, in his disappointment and despair, lost that golden key? His letters at the end of 1863 are short and almost dry. Mathilde

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is the one who keeps the mood. To the end she is patient, trustful, affectionate, faithful. However short a letter she gets from her lover, she receives it gratefully "as the most precious salutation which her heart can desire." On December 21st, she writes, "we no longer need such communications, as an invisible bond to lead us along the pathway of life, in this vast world of feeling to which we belong. The knot of the mysterious Fate which unites our destinies is one that cannot be untied. Nobody can break it."

And yet the knot was broken. Tristan no longer said to Isolde: "She who is everything to me, how can she vanish out of the world?" And she who said to Tristan: "It is I, it is I, sweet lover! Arise, once more hear my call!"—she was Isolde no longer. Fate had woven with her slow invisible fingers the web of a new destiny.

## *Chapter VI*

### A KING: LUDWIG OF BAVARIA— A WOMAN: COSIMA

IN MARCH 1864 Wagner seemed to be about done for. Everything, it appeared, was in league against him. Neither Art nor Love offered him a refuge. He had found an admirable protectress in Frau Wille, "faithful, and true as pure gold." Forgetful of a very recent past, he declared that she was "the one person in all the world." But his flight from Penzing, which she had facilitated, did not make his future any more secure. The uncertainty of what was ahead weighed heavily upon him. Yet he did not abandon his old hope, even though it was almost always the hope which led him into misfortune. He clung to the belief that some day in the midst of his distress and the insults which it brought in its train the curtain would rise for him upon a marvelous happiness.

"I did not know whether the curtain would rise

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in this life, or wait till after I was dead, but I knew that it would rise. That was why I was not afraid when my incredible happiness did come to me. I was certain that it would come. I was only surprised that it came so soon, right now, on the set day and at the exact hour."

On his way through Munich in the course of his flight, Wagner saw in a shop-window the picture of the new King of Bavaria, Ludwig II, who was then eighteen and a half years old. He pitied the "youth and beauty" of one who was placed in so difficult a situation. Five weeks later, he found himself at Stuttgart and was invited by the King's secretary, who had been searching for him at Penzing and elsewhere, to wait upon his youthful Majesty. It appeared that Ludwig was all impatience to lay eyes upon him.

"The miracle of poetry has entered as a divine reality my poor life, starved for love," he wrote in his first letter of thanks to the King, who had wished to see him to express his admiration and offer any benefits he could confer. "Admiration" is not an adequate word, and Wagner says more to Frau Wille— "He loves me with the ardor and the sincerity of a first love," he wrote,

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“He knows all my life and all my works. He understands me like my own soul. He desires me to remain at his side, to labor at my appointed work and take my rest afterwards. He wishes to give me all that I can have need of, if only I will stay near him. He wishes me to finish the *Ring of the Nibelung*, and he will have the operas played as I want them.”

Pursued by his creditors and with no place to rest his head, Wagner needed desperately money and a lodging. The King gave him both. He gave him a villa on the shore of Lake Starnberg, within six minutes carriage ride from the Royal Castle where Ludwig lived in the summer. Every day, and often twice a day, the young prince sent for his illustrious friend, who, to quote his own words, “flew to him like a lover to his mistress. Relations more touching could not be imagined. Never have I met elsewhere such a passionate desire to learn, such understanding, such a thrill of ardor throughout a whole being. Add to that a tender solicitude for me, a delicious purity of heart, and the delight in having me which shines in his eyes when he tells me of his happiness. We often sit for hours just looking at each other.”

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It was after a performance of *Lohengrin* that Ludwig in a state of deep emotion had flung himself (he was then only fifteen) into the study of Wagner's writings. He made him from that instant his only master. He knew his struggles and his misfortunes, but he had not been able to persuade his court to go to the musician's aid. He had promised himself, if ever he had the power, that he would "prove his love." He kept his word.

When he had near him, all his own and his alone, the genius whom he admired he transformed into a "heavenly dream" a precarious existence. And Wagner, whose incredible misfortunes (as he saw them) had convinced him of his own superiority to other men, was not surprised at being suddenly uplifted from the depths of the abyss where he was so near to perishing. It was his reward, well won and inevitable. He saw in the young prince who had sought him out and called him to his side, "his country, his home, his happiness." As a youth he himself had dreamed a dream. Shakespeare was alive. He saw him with his own eyes. He listened to him with his own ears. He wished that he might have seen Beethoven, also—who



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was already dead. What had happened to himself with regard to these two geniuses whom he worshiped, he saw happen in the heart of the lovable being who had saved his life and who was grateful to him for having been able to do him that service.

Thereafter, "his art lived with a visible life in that admirable young man," of whom Liszt, who read his letters, was to say that "his power to receive was equal to the power of Wagner to produce." As for Wagner, he told Frau Wille that his King had "in his eyes completely redeemed the male sex"—of which, it seems, his encounters with Wesendonck, and others who were not always ready to provide him with money, had given him a mean opinion.

But in spite of his love for his young King, could he give up women? Hear him: "With a sigh, I say no. And yet I could almost wish that it might be so." In fact, he could not. He felt horribly alone in his big house, and his spirit was paralyzed by the necessity of having to do personally things he hated. Didn't he have to move in, to settle his house, to buy forks, spoons, kettles and linen? It was humiliating. "I, adorer of women.—How they revenge them-

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selves on me by leaving me such chores." He made vain attempts to fetch thither Mariette, that "precious little treasure" who received him at Penzing in pink pajamas in her warm and perfumed room. The daughter of the boss cabinet maker of the Viennese suburb of Josephstadt, whether of her own will or because her father held her back, refused to come. They say that she resisted even an autograph letter from His Majesty, King Ludwig II. Wagner's excitement a bit calmed down, he "suffered in his life": he was not completely happy.

At the end of two months what he lacked appeared. Frau von Bülow came with her two children and a nurse. "The husband follows," wrote Wagner. Hans von Bülow did, indeed, follow at a distance. He reached Starnberg ten days later. Even in Cosima's presence, Wagner remembered Frau Wille. He wrote to his old friend: "We must have a heart-to-heart talk again. God knows when the opportunity will come again: I would so willingly die now."

Great artists talk glibly of death when they know that their torch of life is about to burn more brightly, with a fuller flame and a more worthy fire. When she came to Starnberg,

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Cosima, wife of Hans von Bülow, brought with her a love which was going to fill—and fill in such a fashion!—the last last twenty years of Richard Wagner's existence.

Hans von Bülow was Wagner's favorite pupil. When he was seventeen years old he had already paid his master pleasant visits at Dresden. He was then a law student at the University of Leipzig, an ardent politician, talkative and frank. His tastes lay in the direction of music, from which his father was obstinately resolved to separate him. In 1850 the young man in a very doleful letter confided to Wagner the fact that his father insisted on his persevering in the profession of the law for which he had no vocation. With emphasis Wagner advised him not to sacrifice to parental whim his intellectual and moral life, and to risk a quarrel with his family rather than let himself get on a wrong road. He offered to receive him and help him.

Accordingly, when he could not win his father over, the young man came to his patron at Zurich. He made the journey on foot, accompanied by Carl Ritter. Wagner had assumed a big responsibility. He tried Hans out as conductor of a musical sketch and he handled his baton with a

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sureness which matched his delight in it—"without even knowing what it was about." That first test, under such difficult conditions, convinced Wagner of his protégé's aptitude. Hans succeeded just as well, in even more difficult circumstances, perhaps, as bandmaster at Saint Gall, and a reconciliation was arrived at with the father. During the Easter vacation of 1851 Hans, with a letter to Liszt, was sent to Weimar to complete his musical education. That expedition was to have a decisive influence upon his future. Bülow was a man of considerable gifts and learned much both as conductor and pianist from the Weimar school.

When Wagner saw Bülow two years later, he was struck by his progress, his talent, his extraordinary virtuosity, and the intelligence with which he interpreted his own works. Besides, there was in him a sort of "hectic fire" which made him put life into things wherever he was. Wagner took him for a confidant and collaborator. In August 1857, Bülow married Cosima Liszt, natural daughter of the great artist and the Countess d'Angoult, who, under the name of Daniel Stern had made herself a considerable place in French literature. Cosima was twenty

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years old at the time and had been brought up by Liszt's mother in Paris. She was curious about all sorts of mental activities. Her clean cut profile bespoke grace, tact and will.

The marriage with Hans von Bülow was not a love match. He sacrificed himself to his friendship for his master, Liszt, who had a special affection for this irregularly born daughter of his and desired to cover her false position with a respectable and even distinguished name. The union was ill-assorted. The pair had nothing in common but their love for music and their admiration for Wagner.

The first meeting of Wagner and Cosima went back to 1853, and, in spite of her extreme youth, he made a deep impression upon her. She saw him again on her wedding journey to Zurich. Wagner went to the hotel and brought the bride and groom to The Retreat. He was busy then with *Tristan* and it was to Hans that he entrusted act by act the transcription of the work, which produced upon Bülow no less an effect than upon the Wesendoncks. They played a great deal of music during that visit. Hans's virtuosity delighted in the difficulties which the *Ring* offered to his skillful fingers and though

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there was as yet only a pencil draft of the score, he played off-hand two acts of *Siegfried* as Wagner sang it. Cosima listened with bowed head and said nothing: When she was urged to speak she burst into tears.

What was in that bowed head and behind those tears? Certainly admiration and emotion, but perhaps also the tender sympathy which is often the first form of a budding love. Wagner's young friends returned in September to Berlin where they were to become acquainted with the serious side of marital life. What does that mean? Judging by Wagner's own case, the "serious side" would have meant only scenes, rows, reconciliations, and a life of perpetual misunderstandings. However that may be, the Bülowes returned to The Retreat the following year as they had promised. Their visit coincided with the return of Minna and the unlucky triumphal arch, and they were witnesses "of the distracted days" which the unhappy Wagner lived through at that time. They did their best to help him in his "abominable state of upset" and seemed to him "sent from heaven" to calm the tempest let loose by his jealous and tor-

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mented wife. Hans especially had become very dear to him.

“As for Cosima,” he wrote to Liszt, “she feels more drawn toward the Herweghs; I feel that I do not please her as much as I would like to. But never mind, we are excellent friends.” By the end of the visit, however, he must have been convinced that the wife was as much attached to him as the husband.

When they went away, Hans “bathed in tears” and Cosima “guarding her dark silence,” Wagner left The Retreat where nothing was now left for him but to suffer. But their artistic relations continued. It was Hans von Bülow who arranged the first act of *Tristan* for the piano. He rejoined Wagner in Paris in 1860, passing most of his time at the master’s lodgings and putting himself at his disposal for all sorts of services, for which Wagner expressed his gratitude. In an indirect way it was Hans who brought about Napoleon III’s order to play *Tannhäuser*. Though he had “troubles of his own”—Wagner does not specify what these troubles were—his young friend was present at the rehearsals of the opera and suffered cruelly when it was unfavorably received by the Parisian public. Then Hans

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preceded Wagner to Carlsruhe to find out how the Grand Duke felt about using his influence toward getting *Tristan* produced.

In 1861 Wagner went to see Liszt at Weimar. Bülow, who was there, was the liveliest of all the many guests, and he conducted his father-in-law's *Faust Symphony*, with "admirable skill, precision and warmth" in spite of the very ordinary orchestra charged with the execution. Among Liszt's guests was Emile Ollivier. Ollivier had married the other daughter of the house, Blandine, whom Wagner had known in Paris in 1858. She had made a most pleasant impression upon him because of her sweetness, her merry disposition, and a certain abandon and mental dash, not to mention her readiness and keenness of wit." One word was enough to make anything and everything clear between them. Wagner had not forgotten the spell of this delectable young person, doomed unfortunately to an early death, and haunted by a presentment of that doom. So that he was glad to meet her again at Weimar.

Cosima was taking a cure at Reichenhall. Ollivier, Blandine and Wagner decided to pay her a visit. Liszt accompanied them to the station.



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They spoke of Bülow, who had left the day before. "We showered praises on him," says Wagner, "and I added by way of jest that he need not have married Cosima, to which Liszt answered, with a little bow: 'She's a luxury'." It was a coarse jest at best. Wagner makes bad worse by dictating it to Cosima herself in his autobiography. Tact is utterly lacking in the affair.

After a merry journey by way of Nuremberg and Munich, Ollivier, Blandine and Wagner arrived at Reichenhall. They found Cosima in good health. The fine mountain air and plenty of walking had done her a deal of good. The two sisters, happy to be together again, shut themselves up in their room to talk things over. Their outbursts of excited chatter disturbed the political conversation which was going on in the next room between Wagner and Ollivier. It was too much for Wagner, who in order to get into their room pretended that he intended to adopt the girls—because Liszt neglected to take care of them. "This idea did not impress the young women so much as it amused them." Cosima's feelings toward Wagner were not of the sort

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which usually go with being adopted. Listen to Wagner:

"I complained one day to Blandine of Cosima's wildness. Blandine did not understand me at first. But finally she said that the word I used implied the shyness of a wild creature. After a few days I had to continue my own journey, so pleasantly interrupted. I said good-bye to my friends and on the doorstep I encountered a look from Cosima—a shy and questioning look."

Did not that mute appeal at the departure from Reichenhall, recall the "dark silence" which Cosima had kept at the moment of the earlier parting at Zurich? Wagner cannot have been deceived. Was it because of it, or in spite of it, that, when he was looking about for a place for a country vacation in February of 1862 he appealed to Cosima—who lived in Berlin? "She seemed quite frightened at the idea," he says, "—something I understood afterwards when I saw how the Bülow's lived." It is possible that Cosima's refusal to take Wagner in proceeded from other reasons than the modesty of the Bülow's quarters.

Wagner found at Biberich the house he was

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looking for. In July Hans and Cosima came there to pay him a visit. He received them with much pleasure. Cosima sat by while Wagner posed for a painter, one Cesar Willig, who had been sent by Otto Wesendonck to do his portrait. She did her best to steer the artist in the right way—but the portrait was a failure, except as a likeness. Cosima also met Fredericke Meyer, whose intelligence she appreciated.

The visit was interrupted by numerous excursions upon which Cosima was very gay and Hans frequently gloomy. He fancied that he was persecuted and Wagner made strenuous efforts to console him. His understanding with Cosima was so complete that he could allow himself all sorts of audacities in the way of bad boy tricks. Everything between them brought a laugh. "She had lost with me the shyness which had characterized her at Reichenhall and was very friendly. When I was singing one day in my own fashion Wotan's Farewell I saw on Cosima's face the same expression which had struck me when she left Zurich, but this time the ecstasy of the look was a serene ecstasy. All between us was silence and mystery."

Cosima was, in fact, as well aware as Wagner

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of the mystery of that silence, "I do not understand," she wrote to the painter Lenbach, "how such a being as Wagner has been able to run around loose among us so long, and I am only glad because I have been able to recognize the sad misfit of it. The discovery I have made has showed me my own way, too. From now on I have no other thought than the accomplishment of my mission. In that mission I will find at the same time my own happiness."

They met some months afterwards in Leipzig during the rehearsals for a concert in which a young composer, Weisheimer, was offering his first work to the world, and in which Hans von Bülow was to play a new Liszt Concerto. Cosima had lost her grandmother. When Wagner, ill at ease before a new orchestra and a new public, saw her in a corner of the hall, pale and in deep mourning and smiling at him, he had the "sudden feeling that he was snatched up out of the world."

The hours that Wagner passed then with Cosima are cherished as among the best of his life. Their intimacy grew. It narrowly missed being spoiled by the idiocy of a preposterous person, a friend of the Bülows, who reported to

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Cosima as coming from Wagner offensive remarks which he had not uttered. Tausig intervened and set things right. He so entirely dissipated the cloud that Wagner, on his way to Russia, stopped in Berlin with the Bülow, dined with them and had a delightful drive in a carriage with Cosima, who was with child. That did not matter. Nothing about her could displease him. When he came back in May, 1863, he found her just after her daughter Blandine was born, "but well, none the less, and in a pleasant frame of mind." They took another drive in a fine carriage in the Allées of the Thiergarten and in the evening they dined with Hans, who had recovered his cheerfulness.

At the end of November Wagner, who was leaving for Silesia, yielded to their urging—particularly, he says, because he wanted to be present at a concert conducted by Hans—and spent a day with them. While Bülow was getting ready for his concert, Wagner took his third carriage ride with Cosima. "Silence took the place of teasing chatter, eyes gazing into eyes, we felt ourselves mastered by an imperious desire to avow the truth. Though we had no need to speak to understand the infinite woe which

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flooded us, the mute confession was a comfort. A deep calm settled over us and made it possible to get through the concert." After the concert they hoped "to be left alone with their souls and their thoughts." Instead they had to sit through a heavy supper at an old friend's house.

Next day Wagner proceeded on his journey. A new love had entered into his life. Twice before the presentment of it had come to him, but no avowal had confirmed his guess, and the "mysterious fear of being misunderstood" had condemned him to silence. Now a sweet and terrible certainly filled his fifty-year old heart. He loved Cosima and he was loved by her—Cosima, the wife of his most devoted friend, of his "beloved disciple." What was he to say? What was he to do? To Mathilde Wesendonck he was no more now than a distant lover out of a dead past. But Minna was not dead. And he was on the verge of financial ruin. He could be saved only by a miracle.

A miracle did save him. It was King Ludwig—his "guardian angel" come down from heaven at the darkest hour of his despair. Only the devoted Frau Wille had stuck by him, but, though that good woman had given him a refuge she was

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unable to satisfy the pack of money lenders whose impatience was growing more menacing every day. It was at this moment—when Wagner had drained the cup to the dregs—that the unexpected summons snatched him from the abyss. He was in the midst of the delights of his “love affair” with the King when Cosima came back to him. These delights filled his soul, but could not, by themselves, fill his life. Cosima’s arrival brought the very breath of life that he needed.

Yet by a singular twist of his nature, Wagner, even in the midst of so much happiness, was not happy. He felt that his life was only just beginning, and, at the same time, he was utterly disgusted with it. He envied Frau Wille her “perfect happiness.” What, then, did he lack? Was it his destiny to torment himself always and never to know the blessed peace of the soul? He took everything seriously—even the smallest things. He could not enjoy the pleasures which satisfied the ordinary man.

The truth is that Wagner’s nerves, like Bülow’s, were “sick and too highly strung.” Like Bülow he was easily put out of sorts—by bad weather—by cold—by a visit which left a bad taste in his mouth. He saw the tragic element

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in his friends' family relations. That young woman who was so "incredibly gifted, worthy of Liszt himself, and even more intelligent than her father," had dragged around with her for seven loveless years a sickly husband whose mad application to work brought on fits. Wagner had no trouble getting the young king to attach Hans to his person as pianist. That served to keep Cosima with him.

"I hope," he wrote on September 9, 1864, "that I will soon have the Bülowes really under my wing. The two of them have found only one way out: to create and to work together for the greatest good of great art. Therefore, we will have one more reason to keep up the fight, offensive and defensive, in spite of all the tiresome difficulties with which our lives are encumbered. You see nothing succeeds with me anymore."

Wagner could not spend the Winter in the villa on Lake Starnberg, for the dampness of the place had affected him even in summer. He tried to find a flat in Munich as a permanent place of abode—and he found nothing. Then the king gave him a magnificent house, which he furnished with his usual luxurious taste. Mathilde Maier, his young friend from Mayence, was present



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with her mother at the house-warming of the new establishment in the Briener Strasse. With admirable devotion both of them had hurried to come to him and look after his health upon a false rumor that he was seriously ill. When the Maiers departed the Bülow's arrived. And a real mistress of the house was installed.

Cosima, who was addressed as "Madam the Baroness," took charge of the mansion. She and her husband did not live there but she had an office and reception room. She kept an eye on everything and attended to everything. She fulfilled all the duties of the mission to which she believed herself destined toward the genius she admired, and she tasted the joys of love in the association. Hans did not interfere. He was not a complaisant husband, he was a blind husband. He could not be surprised that his friendship for Wagner was shared, aided and served by his wife. More than that, he was glad that it was so. Cosima in his eyes was the priestess of a cult to which he had given his heart. Vowed to the same religion, they were joined in a common admiration for the same god. Not a suspicion of betrayal had so far touched his loyal soul.

Cosima, mistress of Wagner's house and mis-

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tress of Wagner's heart, busied herself with his correspondence and with his work. She attended to the business that had to be done and she shooed away inopportune visitors. Her watchful and active devotion won favor for her with the king. Ludwig II wanted to collect Wagner's musical and literary manuscripts. It was Cosima who asked the lucky possessors of the manuscripts for them. But she made rather a mess of the job. Tausig had the original score of *Tristan*: he did not answer the summons of the lady whom he called Wagner's "Oracle of Delphi," because she had written in cavalier style. There was more to it than that. Cosima had estranged Wagner from this old friend, by urging that he hadn't the least originality and was only a caricature of Liszt.

If Tausig was amazed not to have the request come from Wagner himself, you may fancy the surprise of Mathilde Wesendonck when she got a letter from Frau von Bülow asking for certain of the literary manuscripts which were in her hands. With characteristic restraint she indicated her astonishment to Wagner by referring to him the question whether she should send him any, and if any, which manuscripts. The lesson

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was well deserved. There was a touch of delicate irony in the wording. Mathilde wrote:

"I was very happy to learn from kind Frau Bülow's letter that you are well and that you have gathered your best friends about you."

The date of this letter was December, 1863. Wagner replied to his "dear child" in a letter which plainly showed his embarrassment. It was a mass of evasions and contradictions, in which he attributed Cosima's action to the insistence of the king, who "desired to have all of him." In the answer there was an allusion—the last—to *The Retreat*, the sale of which had been again advertised: "Is it true? Where then should I go?" This last question was a clumsy attempt at politeness. Wagner knew that *La Colline Verte* belonged to the past.

He had directed his assiduities as a lover elsewhere, "without even saving appearances." At least that is the verdict of his old comrade Peter Cornelius, who reproached him with having "lost the old goodness of heart which made him keep a friendly countenance for all those who deserved it. The main thing is the bond of love between Wagner and Cosima. He is utterly and abysmally under the influence of his new mistress.

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Since Bülow has gone away on a concert tour she spends all her time at Wagner's house, either alone or with her children. Impossible thereafter to see Wagner alone or to have a private conversation with him. No letter ever reaches him any longer unless Cosima opens it first and reads it to him."

Mathilde had inspired him. Cosima ruled him. Both women loved Wagner, but each loved him in her own way and according to her own temperament. Perhaps each of them came at the right moment. A woman with a heart was needed to inspire *Tristan*: a woman with a head was needed to cheer on the formidable enterprise of the *Ring*. The *Ring* had become Wagner's preoccupation. His young king, for his part, was obsessed with it. He had stopped the building operations begun by his father in order to provide the money to produce the *Ring*. Wagner believed in the early days of his stay at Starnberg that little by little everybody would love him—that he would succeed in serving everybody without hurting anybody, and flatterers and designing persons had gone so far as to tell him that he could dominate all the Court if he wished. The year 1864 had hardly rolled by when reality

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took its revenge on the dreamer. In February 1865, Wagner, in defence of the King's honor and his own happiness, had to feign that their friendship had grown cooler—and his own influence less.

"I do not know," he says, "what to do with my heart and my conscience. How can I save my heart? How can I remain an artist?" The storm passed. Wagner knew the uneasy delights of a doubly adulterous paternity. On April 10, 1865, Cosima gave birth to a daughter—Isolde Ludovica Josepha, who was accepted with pride by the still blind Bülow. Then came rehearsals of *Tristan* with the Schnorrs, "a family of gifted and devoted artists." June 10th saw the production of the opera—the culminating point of Wagner's life after so many trials, the decisive success which redeemed for him all the bitterness that went before.

"And yet," he writes, "the sweetness of it was marred by the many absences for which I could not succeed in finding consolation." On May 15th he wrote Mathilde Wesendonck this simple note: "My friend, *Tristan* will be marvelous. Will you come?" She did not come. Frau Schnorr was on the stage upon which the poetic

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fiction became a living masterpiece, and she was an Isolde beyond compare. But the living Isolde—she who had tended Tristan's wounds and drunk with him the magic draught—that Isolde was absent. She had dug a grave, and she had buried in it her love, her hope, and her desire, and all her tears and all her joys and all her sufferings.

Thus no happiness was complete for Wagner. He said that he was on the summit, but he knew (and he said) that the summit is not "happiness." On the heights to which his genius had lifted him, he still encountered struggle and suffering. In December 1865, he fell afoul of the king's ministers, and the ministers were supported by public opinion, which had been turned against him by cruel slanders. Cosima stirred him up to take pen in hand and write with her assistance, an article which handled the Bavarian Government pretty roughly. The Government took up the challenge. The ministers made it a condition with Ludwig that Wagner should get out, and on December 10 he quit Munich.

Cornelius, faithful in misfortune, was one of the friends who said good-by to him at the station. He has painted a picture of the scene,

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Wagner "with a face like a ghost, his features pale and drawn, his long hair all sprinkled with gray. He talked apart with Cosima, and one of us heard him use repeatedly the word 'silence.' Cosima seemed all in. Since then she has been in a wretched state. God bless both of them, if they really love each other with all their hearts and if poor Wagner has been able at last to find at the risk of his life the mate he needed. It really does seem that Wagner is in love with Cosima. He said that the hope of seeing her soon again was his one comfort. If this is true, I hope they may be able to enjoy a quiet happiness together."

This Peter Cornelius was a sturdy fellow, whose word is worth taking. Events turned out according to their wishes. Wagner settled in the outskirts of Geneva. But it was at Marseilles in the course of a pleasure trip that he learned in February 1866, of the death of Minna. His enemies accused him of having left his poor wife at Dresden without a sou so that she was reduced to taking in washing to earn her living. Minna herself protested publicly against what she said was a "vile falsehood."

This loyal declaration could not fail to touch

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Wagner at a time when slander raged violently against him and made use of all harmful rumors to dishonor him, or, at any rate, to make impossible his continued stay in Munich with Ludwig II. He was grateful to that life companion, whom perpetual misunderstandings and the incompatibility of their characters had forced him to keep at a distance. He had married too young. Minna had her qualities. She had a heart and a sense of order, but by the admission of her intimate friend, Frau Hervegh, "She lacked tact: owing to her passionate nature which she could not control, and owing also to her very insufficient education. In order to continue a lasting partnership with Wagner the poor woman would have needed a refinement which had never been hers."

This testimony tells so precisely what was the matter with Minna that it says quite enough. It would be unfair to overwhelm the poor woman with additional reproaches. Wagner was moved by her death. He asked his friend Pusinelli to attend to her gravestone. And he wrote characteristically: "How enviable she is—she who has at last and painlessly departed from this scene of



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mortal strivings! Peace, peace to the cruelly shattered heart of the unhappy creature!”

Minna's death set Wagner free. He had hoped that he might very soon return to Munich, where he had ordered new decorations for his house, but the rancor of his enemies was persistent and powerful and did not permit the king to yield to his wish. Cosima came and joined him again in March 1866, while Hans was on a concert tour. The time had come to act. The lovers looked for a house big enough for both households and adapted for Wagner's work, for his creations were now developing on a grand scale and with a power more than ever sure of itself.

At Tribschen near Lucerne they found a villa, embowered in trees and green things, with a glorious outlook upon the Lake of the Four Cantons. It was a simple dwelling, but Wagner had always a crew of upholsterers and decorators ready to minister to his taste for luxury, and he was more happy than sorry to have a new nest to line. He promptly rented the house, which Nietzsche was to call the Isle of the Blest. Cosima, who was determined to dare everything to assure her independence and her happiness,

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joined Wagner there May 12th, 1866. She brought all her children with her.

This time Hans was not blind. His credulity had not been shared by his friends for a long time. They knew that his marriage was no longer such except in appearance, but what would he do when he learned the truth which he alone did not know? Peter Cornelius asked himself if he would not simply yield his wife to his master, and he pitied him the more as he walked his thorny path, because he knew that Hans was good, loyal and a man of honor. A letter from Wagner to Cosima, which arrived after her departure for Tribschen, revealed to the poor husband the full extent of his misfortune. The Bavarian newspapers, besides, were lavish with insults of the most offensive sort. Hans in his turn must act. He went to Lucerne. The conversation which he had with Wagner left him in no doubt about the master's wish to keep Cosima and live with her openly.

To avoid scandal, and with the hope of saving appearances which alas, were already beyond saving, Bülow stayed on some weeks at Tribschen and then went to Basle, to wait for events to bring about a solution which he had not the

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courage to precipitate. His faith had been dashed. He was in a state of frightful confusion. His wife's conduct had made him uneasy for a long time and he may have got a hint of what was going on from the anger with which Liszt had received the news of Cosima's departure for Geneva after Minna's death. But his admiration for Wagner was so great and he worshiped at his musical shrine with such passionate idolatry that he refused to admit to himself and above all to express even to his most intimate friends the suspicions which ravaged his soul.

The situation was tragic enough. It was made more so by a mad performance of Frau Schnorr, the marvelous creator of the role of Isolde, who by a cruel stroke of fate had become a widow soon after the first performance of the opera. The stage Isolde fell in love with Wagner and wanted to marry him. Under the influence of a perfectly crazy adventuress, Mlle Isidore de Reuter, with the face of a policeman and a character grotesque enough to match her face (she said it was her destiny to marry the king), Frau Schnorr threatened to betray secrets of their private life which had been confided to her by Cosima, her intimate friend. Wagner was

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terrified at the danger of these revelations which might very well deprive him for good of the young king's favor. Cosima went to Basle to Hans von Bülow, who, with his usual generosity, helped her to enlist the services of eminent legal counsel to head off the Reuter woman, and wrote to her father to take her away from Munich. A novelist's wildest fancy would be put to shame by the unbelievable incidents which contributed to this mysterious affair.

In the midst of romance, however, love and nature were not cheated of their rights. February 17, 1867, Cosima brought into the world at Tribschen whither she had returned, a little girl, to whom Wagner gave the name of Eva, in memory of the *Meistersinger*, which was presently to be played. Hans could no longer preserve the illusion of fatherhood. But the king's favor had brought him consolations. He had been appointed court band master extraordinary and dubbed a knight of the Order of St. Michael. Ludwig was unwilling to believe that Wagner's and Cosima's relations had gone beyond the bounds of pure friendship. "It would be awful," he said.

In order to hide the awful reality, or at least

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to make the consequences less serious, Cosima agreed to come back to her husband in Munich. Wagner was their guest when he came from Tribschen to rehearsals. Living so often in this triangular fashion, they could not fail to excite public malice, but the arrangement soothed the susceptibilities of the young prince whose faithful friendship and help were so necessary to the realization of Wagner's artistic plans.

*Meistersinger* was produced June 21st, 1868. This masterpiece, in which life and action are developed in such a rich and marvelous musical setting, was received with enthusiasm. But Wagner paid dear for his triumph. The king who had invited him to his box to watch the performance, asked him to thank the audience—for the applause went on and on. The master consented. He spoke to his admirers: the ovation continued with redoubled enthusiasm. Wagner returned to Tribschen under the impression of this triumph, which was the reward of his efforts and the final consecration of his genius.

Alas, he counted without his enemies, whom he had not disarmed. The exceptional and sensational favor which Ludwig II had shown him now turned the tables against him. The news-

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papers used it as a pretext for making fun of Hans von Bülow—sorry victim of a fate he did not deserve. They accused Hans of having sacrificed his dignity as a husband to his vanity as an orchestra conductor. They did not spare Cosima, who was suspected of having been mixed up in political intrigues on Wagner's behalf.

Such violent and gross abuse hastened events. In Wagner's character, as in Cosima's, was more pride than suppleness. They stiffened their backs to meet the onslaught, and their threatened love defied public opinion. Cosima proceeded to install herself at Tribschen, not as a guest who came and went, but as permanent mistress. She openly and definitely abandoned her husband in favor of her lover, and proud of a mission of the greatness of which she was fully convinced, she sacrificed the prophet to draw nearer to the god. In defying public sentiment she disregarded the wish of her father, who would have accepted Wagner as a son-in-law, but who disapproved of the scandal of a free union flaunted like a challenge. Liszt broke off relations with Cosima, and Hans von Bülow, after having directed in June 1869, a revival of

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*Tristan*, departed from a country in which fate no longer left him any useful part to play.

The four daughters of Cosima—Senta, Elizabeth, Isolde and Eva—lived with their mother “who was so good as to come to see me with her children,” as Wagner said to Mme. Judith Gautier when he introduced them. In the ardent enthusiasm of her youth Mme. Judith Gautier, with Villiers de l’Isle-Adam as escort, had made the trip to bring to the illustrious master the tribute of an admiration which her articles had already expressed. Cosima seemed to her “a tall slender young woman, with distinguished aristocratic features; with blue eyes, a sweet smile and a magnificent head of fair hair.” And far from the formalities and conventions of the world happiness reigned in that simple gray house, to which the lake and the mountains brought the splendor and grace of their scenery. The elegant arrangement of the interior showed the taste of the inmates. Cosima had accepted all the duties of a difficult position. Her father, embarrassed in the eyes of the world by his abbé’s cassock and dominated by the influence of Countess Muchanoff—she who inspired Theophile Gautier’s admirable *Symphony in*

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*White Major*—, had prevented Hans von Bülow from asking for a divorce.

Thus, to avoid the annoyance of a legal break, Liszt and his son-in-law prolonged the more serious scandal of an irregular union about which everybody was chattering. Cosima felt the loss of her father's affection—all the sweeter to her because his own life should have made him more indulgent to human weakness—but she did not regret even this sacrifice to her deep and irresistible love for Wagner. His entirely, nothing except to him, mistress of his heart and priestess of his art, she surrounded with her devoted care his labors with their rich fruit of mighty works. She watched over him, she protected him, she served him. She defended and she peopled the solitude in which his genius bloomed. He was happy. Mme. Judith Gautier in 1858 was the witness of his happiness.

She writes of "the gratitude" with which he looked upon: "That refuge, that exquisite retreat, created by the affection of a loved one, who had known how to dare all, and with head held high, to face the reprobation of the world, in order to bring comfort to him to whom she was utterly devoted at a time when he was most



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cruelly harried by the injustices of life—that dear solitude, brightened by the laughter of children, where the blows of fate could never reach him except through a rampart of love.”

Wagner's happiness was increased June 18, 1869, by the birth of a son. He was enormously proud; he called him Siegfried, and he finished the drama in honor of “the strong handsome boy” whom Cosima had just given him. “And now” he said, “there is nothing to do but bring the lusty fellow up greatly. With him will grow up my wife's four daughters, whose education in the profound peace of our retreat is the daily task of the noblest of creatures.”

That retreat lacked legal sanction. Liszt loved Cosima too much and he loved Wagner too much—he loved both of them with too fierce a pride—to persist in an attitude which served neither their interest, their happiness nor their honor. He resumed his relations with his daughter from whom in his heart he had never been alienated. As for poor Hans von Bülow, he brought divorce proceedings. It was the only way out of his painful situation. The court put no obstacles in the way. After the ecclesiastical powers had made a vain attempt to reëstablish

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the marital relations of the pair, a decree of April 6th, 1870, gave Cosima four weeks to return to her husband. She refused in writing to obey the order and declared that she accepted—she accepted them all the more readily because she sought them—all the legal consequences which could follow her refusal. The divorce decree was issued.

Her freedom restored to her, Cosima married Wagner on August 25th, 1870, in the Protestant church at Lucerne. There was no particular solemnity about the marriage. But the baptism of Siegfried, for which Wagner composed his delightful *Siegfried Idyll* brought together on September 4th the friends of the new family. An orchestra lead by Hans Richter surprised Cosima by playing the birthday composition, the motifs of which were borrowed from the themes of *Siegfried*. With that little masterpiece Wagner rewarded his wife for the admirable patience which had ended, after all sorts of sufferings, in making them lawfully man and wife.

“Since the last time I saw you in Munich,” he wrote to Frau Wille, on the evening of the production of the *Meistersinger*, “I have not left my retreat, which, not long afterwards, became

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the refuge also of her who was to show that I really could be saved, and that it was a mistake for so many of my friends to assume as an axiom that it was no use trying to save me. She knew—she at least—that I could be saved—and she saved me. Braving every insult, and taking upon herself all the blame, she came to my side. So we have managed the business in spite of the world from which we were completely estranged.”

That the Wesendoncks were among the “many friends” reproached by Wagner’s belated bitterness with not coming to his aid, there can be no doubt. He introduced his wife to them. The relations between the two families were more correct than frequent. Could more be asked? Cosima tasted with a sort of savage joy a victory for which she had paid dear. She carried her fine wilful head very high. They say that Hans von Bülow when he saw her again one day said to her: “It is not a question of forgiving but of understanding.” If that saying is not authentic it has a certain verisimilitude. It lacks the note of indulgence, but Cosima did not believe that she needed indulgence for herself and was not indulgent to others.

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She had understood. The "dark silence" which she had kept when she learned that Wagner must leave La Colline Verte was already almost an avowal—the avowal of Sieglinde who looks at Siegfried and straightway gives him her soul. What strength must she not have had to hide her growing passion! By concentration that passion had been exalted. She no longer lived except for her love, which was confused in her eyes with her mission and with her duty. When love takes possession in this fashion of both head and heart, it breaks through all obstacles—but it runs the risk of being broken itself. Cosima had played the high stake of her honor in a venture from which she might have emerged, lost, humbled, outcast. She won her game, but she deserved to win because she had understood and because she had willed. She had made her own destiny by a will, the deep and lasting impress of which was stamped upon Wagner. When he published his *Siegfried Idyll* in 1877, he accompanied it with a dedication which is enough to give Cosima her title or nobility among art's immortals.

"It was thy noble will, valiant and self sacrificing, which made the birth of my work possible.

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And behold how far from the world, in this place made holy by thee, in this place where my work grew and gained proud strength, while the presence of a troop of heroes transfigured our life as by magic into an idyll, and created for us a country in an ancient past; behold how a great voice was lifted up to me crying: A son is born to thee! That son was to be called Siegfried, and for him and for thee I was to thank heaven in a tuneful song—for what better thanks could I offer for acts of love.”

When Wagner left Tribschen April 22nd, 1872, to settle at Bayreuth, he had finished *Siegfried* and the first act of *Götterdämmerung*. It was over these works that the solicitude of Cosima far out of the world had kept jealous watch. She did not inspire them, but she encouraged and defended them. Thanks to her watchful care, to her taste and her sense of order, Wagner had realized the dream which had eluded him so often—the dream of a quiet and comfortable home to make his work easy. At Bayreuth a new life was opening before them. If they had not foreseen all the disillusionments they had accepted the struggle which they knew was

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inevitable with the pride and the courage of a love already tried and proved.

The building and the launching upon the world of the "special" theater, the idea of which had been in Wagner's head since 1836, were set about with very great difficulties and the success of the enterprise was several times in doubt. In overcoming these difficulties, Wagner found in Cosima a collaborator whose intelligence, confidence and persistence was beyond praise. She had none of the artificial graces of the theater queen, but with her aristocratic (and often haughty) elegance was combined the practical sense of a man of affairs. She grasped the whole and she did not neglect the details. In one word, she was an executive. She was admirable as the mistress of her house, "Wahnfried"—where she was easily the equal of the most celebrated of her guests. And in the theater, if she did not always know how to make herself beloved she did know how to make herself respected and obeyed by all. The production of *Parsifal* in 1882 was her reward. This superhuman masterpiece lifted at last above argument, insult, and ridicule, the triumphant glory of the Master to whom she had consecrated her life. Without

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vain pride she could take her part in that supreme apotheosis. When others—so many others—had doubted, she had had faith, daring, burning passion, the spirit of sacrifice, of self-abnegation, of devotion.

What she loved in Wagner was his genius. When her god died by her side in Venice in 1883, and when to the lofty strains of Siegfried's march she had buried him at Bayreuth under the stone she had made ready, she grimly withdrew from the world for a year. Alone with her grief she lived over the past. But she was not the stuff that despair lays low. The dead god left a religion and a temple. Cosima looked toward the sacred hill and she knew all her duty.

After the death of Wagner she carried on his cult with an energy of which we are bound in justice to admire the strength rather than criticize the excesses. It is not an easy thing to live a long time as the widow of a famous man. Liszt's daughter for more than forty years wore mourning for Richard Wagner with a strenuous dignity which befitted a great genius, a great work and a great love.

THE END





In Wagner's life as a lover there are still secrets, the most important of which are to be found in the letters he exchanged with Cosima. Will these ever be known? For the rest, certain books will serve:

MY LIFE by Richard Wagner. Although the preface vouches for the absolute veracity of these three volumes of memoirs, with regard to all that concerns his intimate life they must be consulted with caution and omissions supplied.

RICHARD WAGNER TO MATHILDE WESENDONCK: *Journal and Letters*.

RICHARD WAGNER UND DIE FRAUEN by Julius Kapp. The 1921 edition has not been translated and contains new and interesting documents.

LE TROISIEME RANG DU COLLIER by Judith Gautier.









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